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THE PROBLEM OF GRACE IN THE MODERN NOVEL

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the
School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Religion

by
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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM OF GRACE IN THE MODERN NOVEL

The collapse of traditional theistic religious beliefs has ushered in a period of theological reconstruction. The dominant note of this period is the emphasis upon the secular, and the articulation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's worldly and "religionless" Christianity. This is seen quite clearly in Harvey Cox's The Secular City, and in the radical theologies of Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton. The appeal to the transcendent dimension or the speaking of God is either postponed or negated outright as a meaningful option to modern man.

Secularization is viewed as a major, positive force freeing man from tutelage to ancient mythological world-views and sacred symbols. Accompanying the process of secularization is the increasing profanization of life in our period. This has brought about a certain case of mind, which Professor Nathan A. Scott says is "distinguished by an inability to descry in the world any reality that evokes a sense of ultimacy or of radical significance." Moreover, Scott argues:

Secularization of consciousness . . . entails not so much the loss of God as the loss of connection with anything resembling . . . 'the numinous'; what is basically lost is the Sacred, and the great

impoverishment of the human spirit consists in the death of all awareness of any animating power or presence amid and within the familiar realities of nature and history.¹

Losing the "numinous thresholds of experience" has resulted in a general leveling and dulling of the human experience, a general "platitudinizing" of everything. The human imagination has become one-dimensional. The image of man has become characterized by amorphous vacuity. Modern man has been "ousted from the precincts of grace . . ."² It is this situation that must be of concern to Christian theology, for it reflects theology's failure to challenge and stimulate the human imagination and to open up the possibilities of human self-transcendence.

THE PROBLEM

It is the concern and the purpose of this study to examine the problem of grace in the modern novel. Modern literary art, and the novel in particular, can be more than the mirroring and diagnosing of the human condition, as important as these are. It can also be an important means of grace. It can offer what thus far modern theology has failed to offer. It can be an Orpheus to the modern human

¹Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Broken Center (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 150.

²Ibid., p. 154.

imagination, releasing it from its hell of flat banality and positivistic skepticism, and loosing it to serve in the stimulating and integrating of the plural and multi-dimensional nature of human experience. This is essentially Nathan Scott's conclusion in his analysis of the crisis of faith in contemporary theology, the resolution of which may just come through the "seizure of the promise of grace in poetic art."³

Three novelists have been selected for this analysis: Edward Lewis Wallant, Flannery O'Connor, and John Updike. These novelists have been selected on the basis of their considerable individual talent, their breadth of vision and concern, and the depth and intensity of their stories. Their stories and novels are set within the post-World War II world of the fifties and sixties. Their stories and novels forcefully depict and delineate the human situation of this world, and much more. It is the hypothesis of this study that these authors affirm and depict the possibility of grace in human life. Their concern can be described as "religious" in that their foremost concern is with what it means to be human in this time.

³Ibid., p. 186.

DEFINITION OF TERMS AND APPROACH

The novels and stories will be studied from the perspective of Christian theology. The major concern is with the problem of grace in any of its manifestations. The purpose is to develop a critical sensitivity and discrimination to what the authors are saying about the potentials and possibilities of human life in our world today. This means to develop the ability to recognize that "grace has its incognitos through the whole sweep of human experience and talent."⁴ This means to learn to recognize the "disguises of grace" and the "incognitos of God" as they are revealed in literary art.⁵ This is essentially an identifying and affirming function. What are the experiences of the authors' characters? Can some be identified as redemptive? Does reconciliation occur? If so, how does it occur, and at what cost? Are meaning and hope affirmed, or are the alternatives nihilistic? These are some of the questions to be considered in the analysis of the novels and stories.

This purpose requires the awareness and use of theological insights by which to evaluate and test what the

⁴Amos N. Wilder, Theology and Modern Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 11.

⁵Ibid., pp. 128, 131.

authors are saying. At the same time that the Christian theologian needs to be open to what serious authors are saying about human life, and to be able to identify expressions of grace, he also needs to be able to evaluate the authors' "solutions" to the human predicament. Thus, theology must be able to make critical appraisals of artistic expressions. This is necessary for a real dialogue to occur between theology and the arts. It is thus important to set down a basic understanding of the concept of grace to use as a point of reference throughout the analysis.

Grace is the English form of the Latin gratia, which translates the Greek charis. While it appears most frequently in the New Testament in the writings of Paul, he did not originate the word or the idea of grace. The meanings associated with its Greek usage included: gracefulness, charm, graciousness, favor, kindness; a favor, a kindness; sometimes a (magic) charm; and the kind of response of one who has received a favor.⁶ Paul takes the word grace, in the sense of a favor shown without obligation and freely bestowed, and applies it to God and to Christ.⁷ Thus, the 'grace of God' or the 'grace of our

⁶Philip S. Watson, The Concept of Grace (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 11.

⁷Ibid., p. 12.

Lord Jesus Christ' refers to what God has bestowed upon men in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christian theology has traditionally dealt with this in terms of the doctrines of incarnation, atonement, and redemption. Grace describes the way God is experienced or known by faith and the content of that experience or knowledge.

Grace means that God takes the initiative in his dealings with men. Grace refers to God's free sovereign act for men in Jesus Christ. This has come unmerited, unearned, and undeserved. The Pauline formulation, which became a Reformation slogan, states: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God--not because of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) In this sense also the concept of grace functions in a negative way in that it upholds God's freedom and sovereignty against any human claims and attempts to bring about a favorable relationship with God. It is on this point that debates have been waged throughout Christian history. The issues that have arisen include: the relation between sin and grace, predestination and human freedom, and the question of revealed and natural theology. As important as these issues are they are not our concern here. Central to the proper understanding of grace is that it is God's free

gift to men coming unmerited, unearned, and undeserved.

Another important feature of grace is its paradoxical character. In Galatians 2:20 Paul expresses it well: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." D. M. Baillie has called the paradox of grace the "central paradox" of the Christian life. "Its essence lies in the conviction which a Christian man possesses, that every good thing in him, every good thing he does, is somehow not wrought by himself but by God."⁸ It is paradoxical because while attributing all to God it does not abolish the human personality nor deny personal responsibility.

The double aspect of grace is discussed by Reinhold Niebuhr in his analysis of the nature and destiny of man. He says:

Grace represents on the one hand the mercy and forgiveness of God by which He completes what man cannot complete and overcomes the sinful elements in all of man's achievements. Grace is the power of God over man. Grace is on the other hand the power of God in man; it represents an accession of resources, which man does not have of himself, enabling him to become what he truly ought to be.⁹

⁸D. M. Baillie, God Was in Christ (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 114.

⁹Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), II, 98-99.

Both of these elements--the mercy and forgiveness of God toward man and the power of God in man--are necessary for a complete understanding of the concept of grace. This concept presupposes and is in juxtaposition to the Christian concept of original sin. Grace has meaning only if sin is a true description of human experience. Sin is essentially a description of the perennial tendency of the human self to become the object of its love thereby becoming the reference point for its dealings with others, thwarting its doing the good it wills, and producing pride in its own achievements. The Christian faith maintains that it is only through the confrontation with the revelation of God in Christ that can reconstitute the self anew. This is the experience of grace: the "death" of the sinful self and the "resurrection" of a new self. Grace is the offer and promise of a new life that becomes an actuality through faith. Niebuhr makes an important qualification to the Christian claim, which is especially significant to note in the study of secular literature:

While Christians rightly believe that all truth necessary for such a spiritual experience is mediated only through the revelation in Christ, they must guard against the assumption that only those who know Christ "after the flesh," that is, in the actual historical revelation, are capable of such a conversion. A "hidden Christ" operates in history and there is always the possibility that those who do not know the historical revelation

may achieve a more genuine repentance and humility than those who do. If this is not kept in mind the Christian faith easily becomes a new vehicle of pride.¹⁰

New life comes to the self from beyond itself from the power of God which destroys the sinful self and recreates a new self. The movement is from death to resurrection. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the manifestation of the power and love of God in human history, making possible new life for men. This event is the image or model for the activity of God's grace in human life. It reveals that grace is not cheap, a concept against which Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have spoken so eloquently. Grace is indeed costly--it knows agony, suffering, despair and death. But it knows victory over those same powers. God's victory on the cross shows that grace cannot be defeated, that it is a present power that opens up new life to men.

At this juncture, it is important to point up the basic differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology in the interpretation of grace. Grace in the Roman Catholic view is a supernatural substance or power which infuses men with the three basic virtues of faith, hope, and love without destroying the freedom of the will. It may be given and received in degrees, and an increase

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 109-110, n. 6.

in grace can be merited through the successful use of what one already has.¹¹ It is linked almost exclusively to the sacraments of the church. The Protestant tradition has interpreted grace in terms of the forgiveness of sins by which the divine-human relationship is reconstituted. The emphasis has been upon the preaching of the Word of God as a means of grace, and the importance of the sacraments has been diminished.

The event of grace in Jesus Christ brings forgiveness of sins to men. This is the deliverance from the past, and the opening up of new possibilities of authentic life. It is freedom from the past and the openness to the future. It is the transition from fallen to authentic existence.

In summary, grace refers to the free unmerited act through which God restores his estranged creatures to himself. It refers to the priority and initiative of the divine activity and disclosure. And it refers to the forgiving, restoring, redeeming, creating love of God active in human existence. The gracious God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and this revelation becomes real and actual for men "by grace through faith."

¹¹Van A. Harvey, A Handbook of Theological Terms (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 109.

The revelation of God in Christ is the primary reference point for the Christian faith. It is regarded as the special occasion which has the power to illumine and elucidate all occasions in our history. "From that special occasion we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all events in our history. Revelation means the intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible."¹² This view of revelation enables the Christian to observe and evaluate the events of history, including the artistic expressions of man. It enables him to look for the "hidden Christ," to recognize and affirm the "disguises of grace" and the "incognitos of God" in all of human experience. As a response to experience, art can be seen as a human analogue to revelation.¹³ It is revelatory of the human condition in all of its miseries, depravities, and sufferings as well as its glories, joys, and hopes.

SISYPHUS AND CHRIST

In his essay The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus has produced a profound analysis of the modern human experience, and, while rejecting both nihilism and orthodoxy, he has

¹²H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 93.

¹³Roger Hazelton, A Theological Approach to Art (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 45.

offered a positive and heroic image for modern man. He employs what he calls "an absurd reasoning" to the human situation. The absurd describes the experience of the man who discovers the disproportion between his intention and the reality that he encounters.¹⁴ This is the plight of modern man in his yearning for unity in a disordered and meaningless world. The world will not seem absurd to him until he becomes conscious--in a moment of absurd illumination--of the conflict and contradiction between intention and reality. It is at this point that the question of the meaning of life becomes acute. For many suicide is the natural conclusion. Others may choose a leap of faith. Camus rejects both of these options, and offers another. Man must make an heroic stand against the absurd world and while living in the contradiction and disproportion, persist in the quest for human values. This is an existence in constant tension, but one which asserts the value and dignity of human life. This is the interpretation Camus gives to the ancient figure of Sisyphus, who then becomes an image and model for modern man.

A considerable body of modern literature deals with the themes and issues which Albert Camus analyzed in his essays. Camus himself used the novel to examine and depict

¹⁴Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 22.

the absurd, while also offering a new humanistic basis for heroism. The "absurd hero" is a common feature in much of modern fiction. David D. Galloway recently made an excellent study of the absurd hero in American fiction, in which he used Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus as a key or critical aid in the understanding of the contemporary novel. He studied the novelists John Updike, William Styron, Saul Bellow, and J. D. Salinger, and refers to them as "chroniclers of the absurd experience." He feels that they suggest a redeeming life stance which can be described by the term "post-existential humanism."¹⁵ He writes:

Many American novelists are considering the same disquiet, the same anxieties, and the same apparent lack of meaning and hope which Camus analyzed in The Myth of Sisyphus, and they share with Camus a common concern for religious and moral themes, especially in terms of the struggle to find value and fulfillment in a world without God.¹⁶

He then goes on to show the different forms the absurd hero assumes in the selected novelists.

The brief summary of Camus' absurdist analysis and the critical study which uses it are mentioned here for three reasons. The first is to acknowledge a profound indebtedness to the passionate and affirmative work of Albert

¹⁵David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), p. viii.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 8.

Camus. In a time when theology has failed to respond adequately to the yearnings of man, to evoke his commitments, and to stimulate his imagination, a time when nihilism has flourished, and alienation and despair describe the condition of man, Albert Camus provided a positive humanistic option. By first recognizing and facing squarely and uncompromisingly "the cruel mathematics that command our condition,"¹⁷ man can, like Prometheus, make a defiant stand against all gods and forces which threaten his humanity, and can affirm and create human values by which to live.

A second reason is to show the applicability of Camus' analysis to the elucidation of modern literature. Galloway does this very well, while also disclaiming any rigidity in its usage. This study will be referred to again.

The third reason is to make clear again the approach used in this study. The novelists selected will be read from a frankly Christian perspective. We shall be concerned with discerning patterns of redemption and with identifying the motions of grace. Furthermore, it should be said that this position is at variance with the absurdist analysis. Its anthropocentric humanism is clearly inconsistent with the concept of the grace of God. Admittedly

¹⁷Camus, op. cit., p. 12.

it is a useful model in beginning to understand a great deal of modern literature, but there are many characters which do not conform to that scheme when studied closely. Finally, for the Christian, it is Christ, and not Sisyphus or Prometheus, who is the ultimate image and judge of human life.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

The study is limited by the fact that it had to be selective in the choice of novelists, and that it is of American writers. However, it is believed that these writers are representative of serious modern fiction. It is significant to note that they are representative of three religious traditions: Edward Lewis Wallant was a Jew, Flannery O'Connor was a devout Catholic, and John Updike reflects the Protestant tradition.

A considerable amount of critical literature has been written on the work of O'Connor and Updike, but very little on Wallant. This study will not make extensive use of the critical material, but will concentrate on the novels and stories themselves bringing to bear the questions and concerns in the purpose.

CHAPTER II

EDWARD LEWIS WALLANT--THE GRACE OF SUFFERING

Before his death in December, 1962 at the age of 36, Edward Lewis Wallant published The Human Season, for which he was awarded the Jewish National Book Award for Fiction in 1960, and The Pawnbroker, which was later adapted to film. His last two novels, The Tenants of Moonbloom and The Children at the Gate, were published posthumously in 1963 and 1964 respectively. While his novels have been well received by critics and reviewers, very little has been written critically and extensively about Wallant's art. This appears to be a glaring omission by students of the modern novel of an author who brought a deep passion and intensity to the artistic expression of the human condition today.

In keeping with the purpose of this study, it can be said at the outset that grace in the writings of Wallant can be characterized as the discovery and affirmation of the value, worth and dignity of human life. This discovery does not come easy, indeed, it comes at a great cost. A man wallows for months in grief and despair until he discovers through memories and through incidents outside of himself, resources of affirmation. The sacrificial death of a young assistant finally shatters a pawnbroker's thick

shell that had been erected to inure himself to the tortured, nightmarish memories of great atrocities and loss. The squalid suffering and yet intransigent dignity of some tenants finally penetrate into the lonely, indifferent and isolated heart of their rental agent. A nutty hospital attendant sacrifices his life in the name of justice and forgiveness.

In each case, as we shall see, the experience has a redeeming character, reconciliation results, the lonely and estranged re-enter community. Lost or forgotten values are rediscovered and affirmed. Out of a painful period of self-discovery, and from the crisis of events, a new situation emerges in which the characters find new possibilities of love, hope, dignity, meaning and worth. This experience is essentially self-authenticating and bears the paradoxical quality that it was somehow present all the time but was either out of reach or unrecognized.

THE HUMAN SEASON

In this novel the reader is invited to go on a journey. It is a journey with and into a man's soul. The "inscape" of this soul, in all of its particularity and intricacy, is hauntingly familiar. The journey leads to such depths, and lets us see such sights and scenes that, at times, we feel that we should not see them, we should

not be allowed to look, they are too personal, too very real--and yet we are unable to move our gaze. Our journey is not direct, indeed, it is very indirect. It goes first this way, and then that. Every dream precipitates a descent into the past. Persons and events of that past are resurrected in their full reality, and then recede from sight. Almost kaleidoscopically a man's personal history comes to his present: times of pain and suffering, times of death and grief, times of passion and joy--all recreate themselves in his present. The near past, the remote past--they are as yesterday. Which dream will come to dominate the present, and thereby shape the future? This is the concern of The Human Season.

The death of his wife Mary of over 30 years is more than Joseph Berman can take. He is alone, and bereft of purpose and hope. He refuses to live with his daughter and her family, he wants to go it alone, for six months at least. At 59, he is too old to hope for another start, and is too young to resign himself to being a full-time grandfather. He lives alone in the house which he once shared with his wife, a son, and two daughters. His every sound echoes a reminder of his aloneness. He resists the plaintive pleadings of his daughter, and the gentle kindness of Riebold, his life-long friend and partner in the plumbing business. Each night a dream of his past unfolds before

him, beginning with the very near past, and descending deeper into his life and soul, recalling the sources of who he is. Berman regards his wife's death as the final blow, among many he has sustained in his life, which casts God as the arch-antagonist in his life. This God whom he has loved, and to whom he has prayed all his life, is now the object of his scorn and vehement cursing. Of God, Berman says:

"You went too far this time. Even a dog learns after you keep pulling his bone away time after time. Even a dummy like Berman can learn the score. I will curse you every night, do you hear! Instead of prayers I will curse you." His mouth bent in a horrible smile. "Dog, hoont, devil-- may you rot and make a stink for the whole universe to smell forever" ¹

Berman is a modern Job, who has put life, his life, on trial. Persons and events of his past are summoned as witnesses. He searches his past to see if it possesses life-giving, life-redeeming force to vindicate his present. God has become his enemy, he haunts him and has made his life a joke. When the rabbi asks him to recall the lesson of Job, Berman calls it a joke, and says that God ". . . is cruel and takes pleasure in demonstrating how powerful He is, like Superman. 'See what I can do!'" ² He dismisses

¹Edward Lewis Wallant, The Human Season (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1960), p. 40.

²Ibid., p. 134.

the rabbi, for like Job he will not accept any pious answers, and he must find out for himself.

The novelist shows us three months of the struggle of Joseph Berman with his God and with the meaning and dignity of his life. Through the skillful use of alternating dream sequences the author is able to expand the sense of time in the novel, and to reach back 50 years into the character's life. His personal history is probed and examined to its roots for answers to his life, which now appears destitute of meaning and worth.

The novel very sensitively, and yet with great passion, portrays the struggle of a man in grief. The struggle is all the more intense because of Berman's war with God which rages on the conscious surface of his present life. It is his sense of having been betrayed that embitters him and poisons his present. To him God has become a malevolent Trickster, by whom Berman refuses to be fooled, and whom he vows to curse to his last breath.

"Go ahead, go on, soon I'll be able to take worse. . . . With my last breath I will curse you. Ha, you overdid yourself. I'm getting too small a target for you. You did everything--almost, anyhow. Soon maybe you will kill my children and then what will you do? You'll be like a child kicking a dead bird. There'll be no satisfaction. . . . What do you do then, you, supposed to be such a big God."³

³Ibid., p. 29.

This bitter grief sours his relationships both with his friends and daughter. Of his grief, he says to his daughter:

" . . . see, I'm not crying for the good old days. I'm crying because I'm dead. . . worse than dead . . . in Hell. I feel only hate. Oh, how could I tell you? I can't go to you like I am. I would poison your whole house I can't help you mourn, I can't be sad with you. I'm a million miles underneath sad."⁴

This experience of hell is similar to Calvin's definition of the death of the soul as being without God, or being abandoned solely to oneself.⁵

Berman struggles against this abandonment, the emptiness and isolation which threatens to engulf him. To counter the tide of loneliness, he decides to take a boarder. He gives this up after two attempts. The first boarder was a thin, young man whose presence only served to depress him further. The second boarder, a short, stocky, middle-aged man, was so crude and sloppy that Berman was repulsed. His loneliness tried another escape in an impulsive act of sex with a housekeeper hired for one day. But this turned out to be a distorted caricature of what once had great beauty to Berman. And in a particularly low moment, he attempted suicide by cutting his wrists, only to

⁴Ibid., p. 119.

⁵Roland Mushat Frye, Perspective on Man (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 114.

reject this solution. Finally his emptiness is distracted by evenings of television and strange musings.

Beneath the surface of Berman's stormy struggles, and interspersing them, are the dreams and memories, which continue to penetrate deeper and deeper into his life. It is as if in the pain of the present grief he forgot who he is and from whence he came, and his soul must probe and search out and summon forth again those places and times, those persons and events which serve to validate and authenticate his personal existence. The dreams reveal the bitter-sweet admixture of life's experiences, the paradoxical fact that the very things that have produced tears once produced smiles, and that which gives joy will be that which gives sadness. He dreams of the times of illnesses and deaths--of wife, mother, and son--and the exquisite pain, sadness and remorse these brought him. A special, tender moment takes shape in a dream, a moment he shared with his son as a little boy, a moment that "would keep as long as he was blessed with mind and memory."⁶ The glorious and proud moments of his courtship of Mary, when he promised, "all I know is I would do everything for you as long as I live and nothing would be too much for me. I know how to suffer; I would suffer any pain for you . . ." ⁷ His life would show him the depth of that promise.

⁶Wallant, op. cit., p. 52. ⁷Ibid., p. 57.

In the flush strength of his youth, a dream recalls a moment of extreme joy. This heightened sense of joy proved invulnerable. "His heart sang with that mysterious exaltation that had no basis in reason, no foundation of motive or history." His pain and joy held him in an "odd transcendence," and seemed like "the overpowering evidence, irrefutable, of some towering presence."⁸ These exalted moments are seen also in the dreams of his father in Russia before he immigrated to America. Berman adored his father, a huge man of unshakeable faith, and it was with and through his father that something mysterious and wonderous about life was confirmed.

And there was a time, a time of surging glory for the boy, a series of moments when a strange magic was in him, so he thought he felt the presence of God in unique vestments and the world was filled with a peculiar singing mystery, as he walked hand in hand with his father

These dreams have taken their toll on Berman's sense of grief. Something new was stirring in him, waiting for recognition. One night, as he was cursing God, he suddenly realized that "no one heard him, that he was talking to himself. In absolute emptiness."¹⁰ Later he recalls some "old reflexes of the spirit," and he sees that "there was no Enemy, no Betrayer, no bearded Torturer"¹¹ This

⁸Ibid., pp. 75-76. ⁹Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 137. ¹¹Ibid., pp. 142-143.

new realization frees Berman, and he senses new courage within him. He now has a curious sense of quest. While walking the city streets, he stops in front of a tavern as a fight breaks out. A policeman comes on the scene, and threatens to take Berman as a witness. He observes the crowd, and reflects on the many changing dreams people live with. A rain-shower comes and scatters everyone, leaving Berman there alone. Later on, at home, he calls his daughter and tells her that he will come to live in her home. While waiting to leave his old home he comes to a deep insight:

He had no words then for the thing he was sure of But he phrased it in the hidden eloquence of his brain. Answers come in little glimmers to your soul, most clearly in childhood, in the sounds of certain voices and faces and things, when you feel the miracle and wonder; and he knew then that the Torahs and prayer shawls and churches and saints were just the art men tried to create to express the other deeper feeling.

"It's like a light that don't last long enough to recognize anything. But the light itself, just that you seen it . . . that's got to be enough" And then more emphatically, almost desperately, for it was his last hope: "It is enough!"¹²

The novelist has made a startling and profound affirmation of human life. He has led us through the torment of grief, and has not rested until coming face to face with the source of grace and faith. The "other deeper feeling" is prior and sufficient as a basis for human life, its

¹²Ibid., pp. 159-160.

worth and dignity. Present suffering and pain can be overcome and transcended. An individual human life, and history itself, are affirmed as possessing redeeming force affecting and re-creating the present, and opening up the future. Making these discoveries is painful but also joyful, this is why it is "the human season."

THE PAWNBROKER

"That man suffer!" is the thought in the mind of a drunk watching Sol Nazerman the Pawnbroker walk to the pawnshop in the early morning. How much he suffers cannot be readily seen. Memories of unspeakable cruelties and horrors, that make his life worse than death, lurk just beneath his conscious mind to haunt him. Like Hamlet, the Pawnbroker can say: ". . . I have that within which passeth show; these but the trappings and the suits of woe." The Pawnbroker has tried to cover over, to insulate his great "within" from all that would penetrate it.

Sol Nazerman has come a long way since the time he was a professor at the University of Cracow. In the German death camps he witnessed, helplessly, the decimation of his family and friends, and thousands of others, which he somehow survived. He worked with the United Jewish Appeal in Paris before coming to America to work as a pawnbroker for a Sam Pearlman. After two years he began working for

Albert Murillio, a man he has only talked with on the phone, in a pawnshop in Harlem. He was "set up" in business to channel Murillio's unreportable income. Sol was a man with no allegiances, and he did not ask questions. This arrangement was lucrative for him. It enabled him to buy a large home in Mount Vernon, in which he lives with his sister and her family, and to maintain the one value in his life--privacy. Sol was content to let the world do as it pleases, he was indifferent to it, he did not care any more. His conscience and morality are things of the past, and the past is dead. He lived only for the present moment.

Thus has the novelist constructed a situation of extreme intensity and one apparently void of hope. Life and history have dealt mortal blows to Sol Nazerman, and he has fallen to a kind of nihilism of living death. His ability to feel anything died years ago. He labors in the pawnshop--"a museum dedicated to an odd history"¹³--confronting daily countless, faceless, abject creatures:

And all the while the Pawnbroker maintained that long-mastered yet precarious equilibrium of the senses. It was as though his nerves and his brain held on to the present and the immediate like some finely balanced instrument. If it ever broke down

¹³Edward Lewis Wallant, The Pawnbroker (New York: Macfadden-Bartell Books, 1961), p. 8.

. . . he murdered that thought at birth for the thousandth time. The shop creaked with the weight of other people's sorrows; he abided.¹⁴

He appeared heartless and like a rock. But the Pawnbroker held a secret that was inscrutable to the many customers. They sensed something in this presence, and "each took away only a feeling of something quite huge and terrible."¹⁵ In contrast to Joseph Berman of The Human Season, Sol Nazerman does not possess a personal history which can be probed for its ultimate life-redeeming power and personal affirmation. His past stands as a dark cul-de-sac of death and cruelty. Thus, one of the overriding questions of the novel is how the ravages of human history can be salvaged. If history has been a debacle, what are the prospects for hope in the present? How can life begin anew? This is not only the problem for the modern Jew, living in the wake of genocide, but also that of modern man as such, for which the Jew has become a symbol.

As in the previous novel, the author effectively makes use of the dream sequence to reveal, in the manner of a stroke of the painter's brush, the haunting horrors in Nazerman's life. This heightens and intensifies the movement of the novel, and permits the examination of two levels of thought and action. The destruction and ultimate reconstruction of the Pawnbroker is seen on two levels: the

¹⁴Ibid., p. 22. ¹⁵Ibid., p. 91.

increasing frequency and intensity of his dreams of atrocity and death, and the rapid interaction of persons and events, including his conflict with Murillio, an attempted robbery, and a sacrificial death. The convergence of these movements brings about the climax and resolution of the novel.

The Pawnbroker has constructed an extremely obdurate shell about him, an invincibility to threatened penetrations by the world. He tells his mistress Tessie Rubin--herself a survivor of the Nazis camps where she lost her husband and family, to which Sol was witness--that ". . . I am safe within myself. I have made an order for myself, and no one can disturb it. . . ." ¹⁶ He has become an extreme form of Dostoyevsky's underground man. He is an example of what Ihab Hassan calls "modern self in recoil." He writes:

The recoil of the self in passion (from which new values may be created) and its extension in gratuitous actions which refer to no accepted norms (the need to act precisely because action is no longer intrinsically meaningful) constitute the means by which modern man is forced to cope with the fact of nihilism. ¹⁷

Nihilism, as Nietzsche noted, "represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals--because

¹⁶Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁷Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1961), p. 19.

we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these "values" really had."¹⁸ This is Sol Nazerman's condition but with one difference. He is not capable of "gratuitous actions," but must be, "acted upon" before he is free to take action. And this is exactly what happens to break him loose from the deadlock of nihilism.

Sol Nazerman does not live in a void. At home he must put up with the bickering of his sister's family. At work he faces at his counter the countless numbers of the earth's wretched: pimps, hoodlums, junkies, whores, alkies, the poor, and lonely. With them he barter, argues, assays, passes judgements. In a conversation with Marilyn Birchfield, the importunate, and rather naive, social worker who tries desperately to break into his life, he likens his job to that of a priest:

"... Say I am like their priest. Yes, do not be shocked, I am. They get as much from me as they do from their churches. They bring me their troubles in the shapes of old table radios and watches and stolen typewriters and gold-plated crucifixes and half-paid-for cameras. And I, I give them absolution in hard cash. Now what do you think of that! Oh yes, they know I only give them a small fraction of what the thing is worth. But what they get is still a prize to them. They know how difficult it is to get anything from me. If I were to soften up, I would devalue their little triumphs. They would be shocked and confused; I would be like a priest giving in to temptation. Oh, their pleasure is short-lived;

¹⁸Quoted by Walter Kaufmann, ed., Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 110.

the little I give them must be spent in no time at all. But they walk out of my store smiling and reprieved. . . Tell me, Miss Birchfield, tell me this: who can give them any more than a reprieve?"¹⁹

Some of the most poignant, pathetic, and sensitively drawn scenes of the novel are those of the lost, lonely, and broken people who came to the Pawnbroker's window. One such person is the lonely George Smith, who lives on the boundary-line of perversion, hungering for some human communion. He reads, beside pornography, the great books of Western civilization, and when he has something to pawn, he goes to Sol Nazerman hoping for a few minutes conversation. Incidents like this plague and wear the Pawnbroker, for on and on they come. He thought all human life had been gassed and cremated years ago. He asks, "What was this whole ghastly parade about? And why was he forced to endure it?"²⁰ Now the social worker was threatening his "peace and quiet." Her persistent concern is one more demand on his desire for privacy. His horrible dreams, his relations, the seedy customers, and now Marilyn Birchfield, all these pressures are beginning to eat away at his hard shell, and it threatens to burst.

Another major character around whom the story revolves is the young Negro hired as the Pawnbroker's

¹⁹Wallant, The Pawnbroker, p. 108.

²⁰Ibid., p. 190.

assistant. His name is, not without some irony, Jesus Ortiz. He grew up in the streets of Harlem, but he wants to learn a business and make it big. He pesters the silent, inscrutable Jew to teach him the business. Begrudgingly this is what the Pawnbroker does and more. Jesus senses something mysterious in the Jew, some "secret" knowledge or indefinable quality. Jesus listens to his every word, for he has a strange fascination and admiration for the Pawnbroker. This attachment leads him to become influenced by Sol's rancor and cynicism, and it changes his course of action. At one point, Jesus asks the Pawnbroker what he trusts or does not trust. The Pawnbroker says:

"I do not trust God or politics or newspapers or music or art. I do not trust smiles or clothes or scenery or smells. . . I do not trust names. I do not trust expressions or colors or the feel of texture. . . But most of all, I do not trust people and their talk, for they have created hell with that talk, for they have proved they do not deserve to exist for what they are."²¹

Here is a perfect expression of the Pawnbroker's nihilism. He tells the assistant that the only thing he does trust is money, the nearest thing to an absolute in the universe next to the speed of light. These revelations fill the assistant with anger and regret, and set in motion a chain of events that had been building up, but lacked power and motive.

²¹Ibid., p. 87.

Gradually the Pawnbroker has come to find out that much of the money his employer Albert Murillio has channeled through the shop comes from whorehouses. This repulses Nazerman, and he tells Murillio that he will no longer do business with him. The Pawnbroker's lack of fear or concern when threatened with death puts Murillio off. This makes the Pawnbroker wonder why he is trembling and aching if he is not afraid of death.

Jesus Ortiz arranged with three hoodlums to rob the pawnshop. He knew lots of money passed through the store. And did not his teacher tell him that money was the biggest thing going? He told the three men that there must be no shooting. At the time of the robbery he would be there waiting to help open up from the inside. The three men came in masked and demanded the money from the Pawnbroker, but he refused. The men closed in on him, one had a gun. At that moment "he became incensed that his beginning and ending had no more depth and breadth than this shabby, littered shop."²² When the gun went off Jesus Ortiz threw himself in the way, and died in the Pawnbroker's arms. Sol could not understand why his assistant did it. He felt something was breaking loose within him. He felt grief and sadness, and he wept for Ortiz and for all of them:

²²Ibid., p. 197.

So he was caught in the flow of them as he tried to find the wellspring of his own tears. Until he realized he was crying for all his dead now, that all the damned-up weeping had been released by the loss of one irreplaceable Negro who had been his assistant and who had tried to kill him but who had ended by saving him.

The sacrificial death of Jesus Ortiz enables the Pawnbroker to rejoin the human race. His thick shell was broken. He was free to mourn, and to forgive himself. The nihilism was broken, and the value of human life reaffirmed. It was a redemptive event, restoring life and opening up new life. It was an experience of grace for the Pawnbroker, which created a new situation of hope and love.

It is interesting to compare the conclusion of the novel to that of the film. In the film things are less conclusive. After the sacrificial death, the Pawnbroker goes in the shop and plunges his hand on a paper-spike. He then walks slowly off into the night. In a sense the film is saying that the assistant's death did not possess enough redemptive power. It only served to make the Pawnbroker inflict self-punishment, or a second "crucifixion," so to speak. In this respect it fails the intent of the novel. The criticism from the point of view of the novel is that the act of self-punishment is not necessary. This is theologically sound as well. In the novel, Jesus Ortiz has

²³Ibid., p. 205.

a mocking regard for the Crucified Christ. He even tries to picture the Pawnbroker on the Cross. But ironically, the assistant enacts a "crucifixion" to save the Pawnbroker's life. Some of this irony is missing in the film, and the significance of the assistant's death is diminished by making the Pawnbroker inflict self-punishment.

THE TENANTS OF MOONBLOOM

In The Human Season the author led us on a journey to the intricate depths of a man's soul, and there we discovered a sufficient light to illumine and sustain a life. In The Pawnbroker the journey led to a dingy pawnshop in the middle of Harlem, where a man was continually tormented by dreams of unspeakable cruelties and death. We saw his soul in recoil and denied the release of grief until a bullet aimed for him was taken by another, thus opening him up for grief and freeing him for life. And now in The Tenants of Moonbloom the novelist takes us on another tour, this time into the decrepit inwards of four inner-city tenement houses. This time our sleep is not disturbed by incessant dreams. Instead we walk with the agent each week to collect rent, and it is what we meet behind the doors that disturbs us.

Before going to work as the rental agent of the four tenements owned by his older brother, Irwin, Norman

Moonbloom was a college student for fourteen years. He had at least six majors, including accounting, art, literature, dentistry, the rabbinate, and podiatry. He had to quite, at thirty-two when his inheritance ran out. Norman was a daydreamer. He was diffident and bland, he loved being alone. His life was filled with unfulfilled expectations and disappointments, and these brought him sadness. He lived in a shell, as much keeping in as keeping out. His ennui created indifference followed by stagnation, a kind of suspended animation. He felt like he was living inside a block of ice, hopeful yet fearful of a thaw. At one point he notes:

He was out of it, or had never been in it; an invisible placenta allowed him to move at his own speed. His stomach was used to food prepared for mass lack of taste. By lifelong habit, he heard but did not listen, just as he saw but did not look. Like a cautious mouse in an electrified maze, he remembered his few tentative sorties toward things, his few brief adventures into the barest hint of pain. He kept to a small circumference now, having experienced nothing that compensated for the discomfort of sensation. When he asked himself what his life meant, his invariable answer was, evasively, "It doesn't mean anything; it is."²⁴

This is the Norman Moonbloom we join on his excursions into the tenements. In Norman we see one of the major questions the novel is asking and seeking to answer, a question asked

²⁴Edward Lewis Wallant, The Tenants of Moonbloom (New York: Popular Library, 1963), p. 31.

in *Passion by Hamlet*: "What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? a beast no more."

In the previous two novels the author very skillfully and sensitively used alternating dream sequences to provide for the encounter of experience on different levels, and to show the inner tension and development of the characters. In this novel Wallant has created a dynamic and flexible story structure which permits multiple development and encounter. With the main character we enter into the lives of the scores of people in the shabby tenements. We watch how they gradually penetrate into the life of Norman Moonbloom, and we feel their imprint on our own lives.

It is a motley bunch that peoples the Moonbloom tenements. They form that silent mass that lives on the raveled edge of society. They are anonymous, and only marginally related to one another. We meet those with lingering hopes, secret longings, dreams and illusions, burning rage, shaky or missing dignity, open lusts and quiet desperation. They are Italian, Chinese, Negro, Nordic, and Jewish. Each has a story to tell, if someone would listen. Each yearns for some recognition and affirmation of his dignity and worth.

Norman regarded his tenants with loathing, they were despicable to him. They were all so importunate, always giving him complaints. They made him a witness to

their sufferings and longings and battles. "What do you expect from me?" Norman would think. "I'm only the rent agent, leave me alone!" Norman could put some of them off with vague promises, others he had to parry with wry comments and sarcasm. A few could see him as he was, an indifferent robot, a walking cadaver, and they would needle him purposely. The novel reveals how these same dowdy, despicable creatures penetrate into Norman's life and engender a new response to, and understanding of, his life.

The lives of the tenants are vividly and clearly drawn, showing the novelist's sensitive perception and descriptive skill. His characters are among the most memorable in fiction. There are the two sisters Eva and Minna who dote on their nephew Lester, whom they have raised after his parents died. He later gets a girl pregnant, which his aunts "take care of." But he decides to marry the girl anyway, thus leaving his aunts alone. Arnold and Betty Jacoby, now in their seventies, have been living together for fifty years, but have never been married. They have created an intricate illusion for their lives, which each continues to maintain unquestioned. Sidone and Katz are two musicians who have lived a loud wild life together for three years. One day Katz attempts suicide because of his sense of failure at life. The new tenants are Carol and Sherman Hauser and their young son.

They fight all the time, but are strangely united by the love for their boy. Later, the boy strangles to death on something he swallowed, deeply wounding the parents.

The Lublins have survived the German death camps. Their angry and bitter uncle has come to live with them and their two children. They fight constantly. Wung is the young Chinese, who has one affair after another, but who still searches his dead parents for who he is. Kram is a little hunchback, living a sanitary life as a touch-up artist for a photography company. Wade Johnson teaches english and literature, but feels constrained by the system. Ilse Maeller is a German who hates Jews. We learn later that she worked in the camps, and is guilt ridden. She converts to Judaism still beset with the hatred and guilt. Then there is Karloff the huge, Russian Jew who is over a hundred years old. He burns with rage, against the dying of the light, and lives in filth. Sugarman is the candy butcher on the commuter train. He fears the loss of his sexual prowess, for he seems to get his worth through sex. Paxton is a black homosexual trying to complete his fourth novel. Del Rio is a fastidious, lonely boxer studying acting. Basellecci is the Italian immigrant who teaches Italian to second and third generation Italians. He constantly complains to Moonbloom about the bulging wall in his bathroom, which, he says, has constipated him. We

learn later that he has cancer. Beeler, the retired pharmacist, lives with the fiction that his very grown up, sensuous daughter is still a virginal Shirley Temple. The daughter seduces Norman, who was a virgin, and gets a rent cut. All these lives, and more begin to wear down the cold automaton rent agent.

In one encounter after another, with the tenants pouring out their lives to Norman, as if he were a father confessor, exposing to him all of their secret hurts and shames, the icy shell has begun to melt. It is exasperating to him. He cannot understand it. In one encounter with Sugarman, the aging candy butcher, who was pouring out some of his hurts and fears, Norman asks:

"I don't know what you want from me
You spill yourself to me. I don't ask for these intimacies. I'm the agent, I collect the rents. This whole setup is a madhouse. Did you give these great speeches to the agent before me? What deludes all of you people into thinking that I'm interested?"²⁵

Sugarman answers:

". . . Because . . . because you have a look, your eyes are starved. Don't you ever look in the mirror? . . . You are like a queer microphone into which my pent-up words can pour. To what purpose? God knows. Perhaps we all wish to be inscribed upon something. Maybe it has to do with perpetuating our silly little consciousness. If we are wrong, it is the fault of your face--it is a fraud. Change your face, Moonbloom, or else listen and do something for us."²⁶

²⁵Ibid., p. 93. ²⁶Ibid., p. 94.

The comfortable facade was down, the small talk was gone. Norman has to do something. "He who had never been sure that sin existed now wondered whether he was involved in it."²⁷

Norman's brother Irwin wants things as they are, any improvement might raise his taxes. He just wants Norman to keep things together, and to keep the rent coming in. He puts pressure on Norman to put things in order, meaning that Norman has been negligent about sending in the money. So, Norman lives in tension between two opposing pressures: the demands and complaints of his tenants, and the demands of his brother. He decides to disregard his brother's demands, and to yield to those of the tenants. When he figures all that needs to be done, in the way of repairs and renovation, he realizes that it will require more money than he is able to get. But undaunted he decides to do the repairs himself along with Gaylord, the Negro handyman. It was the rent agent's fate to be "lost in a forest of lives," he felt that he had been cast into the inferno of people."²⁸

Big changes are starting to come over Norman. The penetrations made by the tenants, as well as his little affair with Sheryl Beeler, have caused him to emerge from his shell. He feels that he can do great things now. He has

²⁷Ibid., p. 100. ²⁸Ibid., pp. 113-114.

the sensation that his life is just beginning to open up for him. He is considering hope. Gaylord asks him, when he began the work in such a fury. "What the devil you trying to do--make the world over?" "Uh huh," Norman said smilingly, "for me."²⁹

In his new role as handyman he became exposed to greater intimacies. The tenants opened up to him even more than before. He heard many stories and learned many things. Betty Jacoby said to him: "People carry on so about love and hatred--What is so much worse, so much more a burden, is tenderness and pity. Even grief is nothing beside those two things."³⁰ While in the Lublin apartment on repairs, he heard them argue bitterly and then ask for forgiveness, and he realized:

For the Lublins, Hell was never over. But the constant presence of Hell, its garish, molten glow, was a sort of backlight which threw their lives into strong relief and made them tangible, reassuring for each other. Unlike Norman, they had never doubted their existence. They knew their passions and their thresholds of pain. And, strangely, the persistent accompaniment of Hell's savage and wheedling voice also gave them whatever was the opposite of Hell. The fact was, they loved.³¹

When collecting the rent from Sugarman he was told that, "There's a Trinity of survival, and it consists of Courage, Dream, and Love," and that "he who possesses all three, or two, or at least one of these things wins whatever there is

²⁹Ibid., p. 126. ³⁰Ibid., p. 131. ³¹Ibid., p. 133.

to win; those who lack all three are the failures . . . "32

To these things Norman can only say, in wonderment, "Ohh."

There is one more major job left to do, and that is to fix Basellecci's wall. He needs to do it in a hurry, for his brother Irwin will be down and probably fire Norman for causing a rise in the tax rate. He needs Gaylord to help him finish. He tries to explain to Gaylord what has come over him:

"I was a very sensible and efficient person, all my life. I never did anything unreasonable. I never was unduly involved with even the most sensible people I knew. I never would have done all these things, never. It's possible that I've become unhinged, deranged. It's very possible. But the way I am now, my former life seems to be the crazy one. That's how far gone I am. It's all those people, Gaylord, all those people. For the first time, people entered me. I don't know what I mean, so don't ask me. Some of them are disgusting, some are pathetic, Most of them I don't even like, I can't stand them. But they entered me, and I don't know how to get them out. It has nothing to do with reason But I've got to finish and see what it has all done for me . . ."33

So Norman, Gaylord, and Bodiers, the plumber, meet at Basellecci's apartment. The Italian knows that he is dying of cancer, and thinks the men are insane for trying to fix the wall. Norman still insists. In trying to figure out what is wrong with the wall the four of them get drunk. Suddenly Norman picks up a sledge hammer and starts pounding on the wall. The wall explodes, and Norman is inundated

³²Ibid., pp. 147-148. ³³Ibid., pp. 150-151.

with a vile brown liquid. He howls, "I'm born," And in an intimacy rarely reached between men they repair the wall and drink coffee through the night. Norman is drunk with a new knowledge, a new sense of who he is. It occurs to him that

. . . There was only one hope for him, and for all people who had lost, through intelligence, the hope of immortality. "We must love and delight in each other and in ourselves!" he cried.³⁴

Norman is born, he is living, he worries, he loves. He feels united with all of them. Later, while waiting for Irwin at the office, he senses his own freedom, openness, and endlessness.

Norman Moonbloom is a saintlike hero. It may be, as Galloway argues, that he represents the absurd man as saint.³⁵ He certainly encounters a dislocated environment, the overcoming of which takes a prodigious effort with great compassion and concern. He is also similar to the "picaresque saint" discussed by R. W. B. Lewis. The picaresque saint "tries to hold in balance . . . , by the very contradictions of his character, both the observed truths of contemporary experience and the vital aspiration to

³⁴Ibid., p. 159.

³⁵David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 49.

transcend them."³⁶ This kind of saint is not dedicated to a supernatural god, but to what remains of the sacred within the ravaged human community. It is an "image of participation in the sufferings of mankind--as a way of touching and of submitting to what is most real in the world of today." This kind of hero shares in the miseries of man, as well as in his weaknesses and sins. In doing this the hero discovers a kind of "tragic fellowship" with suffering humanity.³⁷ This comes from his many encounters with his world.

The "absurd hero as saint" and the "picaresque saint" are useful critical handles with which to grasp the characterization in much of modern fiction, including Wallant's. Many of the features of these images are identifiable in *Moonbloom*, and in Sammy of The Children at the Gate. But they do not fully account for some of the important elements in Wallant's novels. His characters do not simply confront a hostile environment. The characters are as much affected by the environment as they affect it. It is not what the hero does to or against the environment that is important, but the inter-penetration between the two. It was not Moonbeam's heroic effort and activity

³⁶R. W. B. Lewis, The Picaresque Saint (New York: Lippincott, 1956), p. 31.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 32-33.

that was most significant, but what happened to him and in him that enabled him to become and do what he did. When he discovered pain and love, they were already going on; he just embodied them, and participated in them and extended them further. He entered into the stream of human life in all of its sufferings and joys. His discovery also transcended the present moment, and found kinship with the eternal. This discovery is nothing less than the grace of God manifesting itself in human life.

THE CHILDREN AT THE GATE

The novel is introduced with some lines from T. S. Eliot's poem "Ash Wednesday":

Will the veiled sister pray for
 Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and
 oppose thee,
 Those who are torn on the horn between season
 and season, time and time, between
 Hour and hour, word and word, power and power
 those who wait
 In darkness? Will the veiled sister pray
 For children at the gate
 Who will not go away and cannot pray:
 Pray for those who chose and oppose
 O my people, what have I done unto thee.

From this poem the author got his title and his theme. The novel is concerned with "those who chose and oppose," and "those who wait in darkness." The theme is explored with great sensitivity and passion, and the result is a novel of considerable religious depth.

The novel brings together two opposing types or images of man, two clashing responses to life. The first type, represented in the novel by Angelo DeMarco, is the man of reason, logic and science. For him everything has a reasonable and logical explanation, including feelings and needs. For him two plus two always equals four. The second type, represented by Sammy, is the man of feeling, passion, and compassion. For him many things have no explanation in reason, they remain a mystery. And for him two plus two sometimes equals five! The first cannot account for the second kind of man within his neat, rational categories of thought. To him the other is a kook and a mental case. The second type of man carries the burden of suffering on the behalf of, sometimes in place of, and very often because of, the first kind of man. He can only love and feel for the other. Sometimes the man of feeling and passion can overcome the man of reason through his weakness and suffering and dying. This the man of reason cannot explain.

Angelo DeMarco was a self-made man. He was fiercely independent, and had an unsatiable curiosity. He wanted to know about things, how they work and their function. He felt that to know is to control. He lived in a satisfying solitude, looking down on everyone. He read avidly books on astronomy, biology, physics, and chemistry. At nineteen,

and considering his background, these are no mean achievements. His father died when he was still a young boy. Since then he and his mother and idiot sister lived with his Uncle Dominic in the poor Italian section of the city. At a young age Angelo refused to accept the Catholic faith, calling it a bunch of "ghost stories." He was a constant irritation to his uncle and mother who were hooked on the guilt-confession syndrome. Angelo was a "free thinker," life held no secrets from him, and he received a cool joy after every new fact he learned. He worked long hours for low pay for his cousin Frank DeMarco, who owned a pharmacy across from the Sacred Heart Catholic Hospital. One of Angelo's jobs was to solicit the patients and employees at the hospital. It was on one of his trips to the hospital that he met Sammy.

Sammy was an orderly the hospital had hired recently. He was tall and lean with sensitive features. He was a Jew, and was raised in extreme penury in New York. His background consisted of many menial jobs all over the country. There was something compellingly magnetic about him. Angelo and two other orderlies, Howard Miller and Lebedov, would sit in the solarium and listen to Sammy talk. He would tell one tale after another, and such tales! His stories would invariably be about some inexplicable human incident, such as a sacrificial death. These stories would

gall and aggravate Angelo, who was a man of proof and fact. But Angelo could not break himself away from Sammy's spell. He was fascinated by Sammy's irrationality. Sammy got to him, and it bothered him.

A terrible crime is committed in the hospital. One of the children, Maria Alvarez, who could not speak due to a throat operation, is molested and nearly raped. The whole hospital and community is in an uproar, police are everywhere. Sammy is arrested as a suspect. Angelo's questioning by the police leads to his being kicked out of the house by his uncle. One day at the hospital Angelo meets Lebedov, the old Russian orderly, who confesses that he was the one that had tried to rape the girl. Lebedov is then taken into custody, and Sammy is released and given his job back.

Sammy tells Angelo about his jail experience, and says, "It's so lonely not to suffer, so lonely."³⁸ Angelo vents his confused and angry feeling on Sammy, calling him an oddball and clown. To Angelo human life is an "accident" which resulted from genetic mutations. A man is an animal who is afraid of things he cannot see, and who must invent stories to comfort himself. Angelo concludes from this that there is no one to blame for anything, a man is

³⁸Edward Lewis Wallant, The Children at the Gate (New York: Popular Library, 1964), p. 97.

simply a poor design, and he should not make a fuss about suffering. Sammy tells Angelo that man possesses a sense of humor, and that he has jokes that will really break Angelo up. Sammy tells Angelo that he must try to listen to things that do not make a sound. Sammy says that he wants to do something: he wants everybody to forgive Lebedov. Angelo cries, "whatta you want to do? . . . Make the whole fucken world over?"³⁹ Sammy tells him that that is what he had in mind. He says that he is still seeking his own calling, and feels that he will find it soon.

Sammy presses hard his campaign to get people to forgive Lebedov. He starts a petition around, and tries to get everybody to sign it. He gets a beating from a couple of men offended by his gesture. He tells Angelo:

" . . . What they need is a big, big, tremendous joke to make them see the one little thing . . . that . . . How can they . . . No, but they got to remember Lebedov. He's a human--that's all there should be. There shouldn't be anything else but people on this earth."⁴⁰

Angelo recoils from Sammy's persistence, his madness. He betrays the Jew by sending a note to the hospital saying that Sammy had been giving drugs to the patients. Angelo keeps saying that nothing is anybody's fault.

³⁹Ibid., p. 103.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 120.

The Alvarez girl dies, and the bereaved parents are walking back to the entrance of the hospital. Sammy appears at the scene and screams that he forgives Lebedov, and that they should love one another, and that they should forgive Lebedov. The grief stricken father gives Sammy a slight shove, and Sammy falls backward and is impaled upon an ornate, decorative spear at the foot of the stairs. Now Angelo gets it, he begins to laugh hysterically, convulsively, as at a big joke. Later, after being in virtual shock for a month, Angelo learns that Sammy has left him one thousand dollars from an insurance policy. At this Angelo weeps.

After his sister dies Angelo decides to leave home. He walks by the hospital on his way to the bus. He remembers the day that Sammy died--

And a blade twitched into his heart, beginning that slow, massive bleeding he would never be able to stop, no matter what else he might accomplish. He was surprised and puzzled as he walked with that mortal wound in him, for it occurred to him that, although the wound would be the death of him, it would be the life of him too.⁴¹

The absurd man, the man of passion has brought low the rational man, the man of logic. The vulnerable and involved man has penetrated deeply into the invincible and insular man. Sammy's activity, reminiscent of Isaiah's suffering servant, has served to show, in the words of

⁴¹Ibid., p. 144.

Dostoyevsky, that "the whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not a piano-key!"⁴² And for Sammy this work also consisted of proving to others what it means to be a man. Through Sammy's death, "a quixotic re-enactment of the crucifixion, Angelo learns, despite himself, the grace of suffering."⁴³ His sacrificial death has created the occasion of Angelo's spiritual resurrection. Sammy's death has had a restorative and redemptive effect upon Angelo. He has been made a part of humanity in a new and real sense, no longer as an observer, and no longer daring to miss hearing what happened in silence.

SUMMARY

At the outset it was stated that grace in the novels of Wallant takes the form of the discovery and affirmation of the value and dignity of human life. This assessment is substantiated by the novels, and can be expanded to include several other considerations. The element of grace is strengthened by the fact that the

⁴²Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Notes from Underground, Poor People, The Friend of the Family (New York: Dell, 1959), p. 51.

⁴³Jonathan Baumbach, "The Locked and Lonely Hearts," Saturday Review, XLVII (February 29, 1964), 33.

characters' "discoveries" came about, not so much from their own efforts, but through the activity of others upon them. This had the effect of liberating the characters and restoring them to a fuller human life. Moreover, these results came about at a great cost, human agony and death, thus affirming the costliness of grace.

In Wallant's novels there is a discernible pattern of redemption or grace. They begin with a man in a shell or isolation, in some form. The man is gradually penetrated and made vulnerable by other persons and events. This leads him into involvement and searching, which is climaxed by a sacrificial death or moment of great insight, or both, which then leads to a new self (birth), a restoration to the human community, and to even greater involvement within it. To be a man is to be able to suffer. Suffering seems to be the precondition of humanity in Wallant. The insensitive man learns to feel and to suffer. Not to feel is death. To feel tenderness and pity, sadness and joy is to live as a man.

This movement through suffering to humanity is seen also in Wallant's description of the dimension of time. In the beginnings of the novels his chief characters live almost entirely in the present moment, the immediate is most real. But as the stories progress the experience of time begins to expand, to open up, both the past and the future.

At the end of the novels the characters display and sense a certain kinship with the eternal, not at all diminishing the concrete individual, rather enhancing him and his sense of worth and belonging to the whole.

Another major theme or issue with which Wallant was deeply concerned is that of love, its meaning and possibility. The kind of love that he was concerned with is the kind that recognizes and upholds the dignity of man, his value and worth. Love is then the problem of justice and of forgiveness. Each of his novels deals with the issue of justice in one way or another. In The Human Season the major issue is the justice of God in light of human suffering and loss. The issue was resolved by Joseph Berman's discovery of substantial grounds of affirmation and worth. Sol Nazerman of The Pawnbroker had a much more severe brief against the possibility of justice, divine or human. He was redeemed finally only through the sacrificial death of his assistant. Norman Moonbloom became a saintlike figure who struggled for the integrity of his tenants in love. And in The Children at the Gate the issues of love and justice are dealt with in the secular situation of a modern hospital. Is justice a black and white issue? Are some crimes unforgiveable? Sammy is intensely concerned that justice be done for old Lebedov. This quest leads to his death, a very personal and

sacrificial death. To the world, the hospital, this was an inexplicable event. Its full impact hit Angelo; it was he who felt the burden of Sammy's suffering and its significance. In Sammy, much more than in Jesus Ortiz, we can see the features of the suffering servant of Isaiah 42:1-4, whose mission is to bring forth justice. This is an immensely costly mission, but one in which he will not fail or become discouraged.

Wallant's world is truly multi-dimensional, and resists being too neatly categorized. His is not an absurd world, but one with absurdity within it. His world is not godless, but there is godlessness within it. His world is not devoid of meaning, but there is meaninglessness within it. This world recognizes the many ambiguities and contradictions of human existence, the many injustices, gross and subtle, but this world is not without hope of clarity and unity, and of the manifold possibilities for human life within it. His work is an artistic brief for a truly human world. He once said of his writing:

To say that I enjoy writing would be less a mistake of degree than of species. I sweat and ache and writhe in my chair; it is decidedly not in the nature of a relaxing hobby. Why do I write then? I don't know exactly, only that I must do it. It no longer seems to be my free choice. I do not write to entertain myself and others (although there may sometimes happily be entertainment in my writing). I write to share my views

and feelings of the lives of human beings . . .
However a writer can illuminate the human condition, so must he do it.⁴⁴

Edward Lewis Wallant has greatly fulfilled his compelling vocation, and has revealed the grace of suffering in human life.

⁴⁴Judith Serebnick, "New Creative Writers,"
Library Journal, LXXXV (June 1, 1960), 2204.

CHAPTER III

FLANNERY O'CONNOR--THE MOMENT OF GRACE

The processes of secularization and desacralization, as was noted in the first chapter, have brought about the increasing profanization of culture. Human experience has become banal and, so to speak, "horizontalized," due to the loss of "numinous thresholds" of experience. Apathy, indifference, and indolence have characterized modern life. It is against this condition that many modern artists have reacted. The loss of a sense of mystery and presence, the failure of imagination which makes men lose a sense of glory have enraged sensitive artists. They have felt compelled to express rage and violence as the only way to be seen and heard.

It is in this light that the grotesque, violent, and searing prose of Flannery O'Connor is to be understood. She wanted to wake up sleeping spirits, to crack the shell of indolence and apathy. She sought to "baptize" the imagination anew with a vision that would stir it into new action. Her vision stands strongly against the reduction of human stature by the disease of positivism, the view that all of life can be managed and measured. Her art is a shock treatment for the dreariness of life brought by the total secularization of life. She used violence and distortion

to project a vision to which society is hostile.

Nearly all that she wrote is contained in four volumes: her first novel, Wise Blood, published in 1952; a collection of short stories, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, published in 1955; her second novel, The Violent Bear It Away, published in 1960; and in 1965, published posthumously, another collection of stories, Everything that Rises Must Converge. Most of her life was spent near Milledgeville in Baldwin County, Georgia. Her later years were spent on her mother's country place, Andalusia Farm. There she raised peacocks, which appear symbolically in her stories. She died, at the age of thirty-nine, on August 3, 1964, of lupus, the same disease that took her father's life. She was a devoted Catholic all her life, and has said that Christian theology was basic for a proper understanding of her work.

In an essay written in 1957 she made plain her Christian commitment as an artist. She said:

I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is central in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction.

In that same essay she concluded:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear

as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock--to the hard of hearing you shout, and for almost blind you draw large and startling figures.¹

Thus, we can see the rationale and concern which lie behind and infuse her stories. Her language, imagery, and characterization all serve her central concern, which is to communicate clearly the meaning of the Christian revelation to a society lacking in moral and spiritual depth and direction. ". . . Her overriding strategy is always to shock, embarrass, even outrage rationalist readers. . ." ² Her form is shocking because her content is shocking--the scandalous gospel of Christ. She is uncompromising in the presentation of it, she refuses to minimize it one bit. Her Christ is not a gentle Jesus, meek and mild, but the Tiger-Christ of Eliot. He is a stumbling block, an offense, a grotesque, and a "displaced person." Her Christ "upsets the balance," "puts the bottom rail on top," and makes the first last and the last first. Confrontation

¹Granville Hicks, ed., The Living Novel: A Symposium (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 157-164.

²Robert Drake, Flannery O'Connor: A Critical Essay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 14.

with him is unavoidable. He is the main protagonist in all of her fiction, whether implicitly, or explicitly in the thought and activity of her characters.³

With Christ as the main character in her stories this means that each of her characters has a choice to make, either Christ or the Devil, there are no in-betweens. Every character's action is seen under the aspect of eternity. He faces a life-and-death spiritual struggle, the crucial problem of belief. The crisis of the story reveals the character's sinfulness, at which time he experiences a "moment of grace." From this point the action can go either way--to a redemptive or condemnatory conclusion. Grace or judgment will issue from the encounter. Her fiction takes seriously Paul's statement that "the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) In her fiction this is a common occurrence, as an inevitable result of a wrong choice. The intensity, urgency, and sense of immediacy in her fiction recaptures something of the atmosphere of the Primitive Church.⁴

Flannery O'Connor can be described as an "artist of grace," for in a real sense, the problem of grace is the only problem with which she is ultimately concerned. The grace of God in Christ is the "great protagonist," in all of its processes and shifts in human experience. The

³Ibid., p. 17.

⁴Ibid., p. 18.

ultimate conflict is between the absence of God and the presence of Grace. By beginning with the central Christian revelation she is concerned to show how this manifests itself in human life. The controlling conviction is that the grace of God is present and active in nature and in human life working to bring about its good purposes. When man participates in a supernatural relation with his Creator he realizes his fullest potential. Man attains this relation by recognizing the existence of evil, and his own tendency toward evil, and his ability to triumph over evil through grace, God's supernatural gift which comes with man's full realization of his lost condition and his dependence on Christ. This realization constitutes his moment of grace, the beginning of his salvation. He can then begin to fulfill the purpose of his existence, which is to reflect the goodness of his Creator and to share the happiness of heaven with Him. This is basically her theological stance.

Most of her characters have some form of deformity, either physical or emotional. These imperfections are symbolic of the characters' spiritual problem or sinfulness. All bear the marks of original sin, of finitude literally, and not naturalistically.⁵ She employs literal human

⁵Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1961), p. 79.

symbolism. It has been pointed out that behind the grotesque imagery lies the concept of straightness or "oughtness," without which the grotesque is meaningless. We cannot know that anything is crooked unless we know that something else is straight.⁶

Four basic types of persons take shape in Miss O'Connor's fiction. There are the genteel Southerners, very respectable and dignified; the self-sufficient schemers and exploiters and fanatics; the do-gooders, professional or otherwise; and the enlightened disbelievers, the godless intellectuals. These types are often found in the same story interacting and conflicting with one another, but also they are shown dealing with Christ by accommodating him, manipulating him, ignoring him, and denying him. They learn that an encounter with God is inevitable, but not on their own terms.

WISE BLOOD

In this novel there is a comingling of different kinds of characters representing different attitudes and responses to life. There are two intersecting stories within the whole. The main one concerns Hazel Motes, the preacher of the Church Without Christ.

⁶Drake, op. cit., p. 23.

"I'm going to preach that there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar."⁷

He has made his choice loud and clear. He has brought an old Essex to use as his pulpit. He meets Enoch Emery, the character of the second larger story, who has come from the country to the city. He has taken a job as guard in a museum. He is the one who has "wise blood" that tells him what is important, and when things are going to happen.

Hazel Motes meets an ex-preacher, who blinded himself, and his teen-age daughter. The fact that the man blinded himself fascinates Hazel. He later learns that the man, Asa Hawks, is a fake, that he never did blind himself. His daughter tries to become Haze's mistress, but finally fails.

While Haze is preaching he meets an ex-radio evangelist by the name of Onnie Jay Holy (really Hoover Shoats). He wants to horn in on Haze's racket, but Haze kills Onnie's "prophet." Haze will not tolerate any hypocrites in his church.

Meanwhile Enoch Emery wants to show Haze his "savior" figure--a dwarf size Egyptian mummy. He steals it from the museum and sets it up in his room as a god. He

⁷Flannery O'Connor, Three (New York: Signet Books, 1960), p. 60.

brings it to Haze for an explanation of the sign, but Haze throws it out the window. Enoch is searching for a meaningful relationship, some kind of recognition. He gets the first acknowledgement of himself by a man in a gorilla suit at a movie theater, and he vows to steal the suit in order to gain some kind of identity. He puts on the gorilla suit and buries his clothes. It is ironic that he has to dress like a beast in order to become more human. This is a kind of inverted Pauline "putting on the new man" idea, a reminder also of the Old Adam in all of us, and an evolution in reverse.

On the other hand Hazel Motes is moving to another kind of realization after the killing of the "false prophet" and the losing of his car. He blinds himself, Oedipus like, with quicklime, puts barbed wire around his bare chest, and rocks and broken glass in his shoes. He becomes a penitent. He is a Jesus-haunted man, and has been all along. He had thought that he could get along without him, but he could not shake that ". . . wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around . . . ,"⁸ which lingered in the back of his mind since his childhood.

His landlady tried to rope Haze into becoming her husband. She was the kind that wanted everything she could see, and was always afraid that she might miss seeing

⁸Ibid., p. 16.

something. To her Haze, while blind, gave the appearance that he was seeing something that she could not. Later Haze is brought back to the landlady by the police, who clubbed him on the head and he dies in the squad car. She does not know that he is dead, and she stares into his eyes.

She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She . . . felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pinpoint of light.⁹

This "holy fool," the evangelist of extreme nihilism, has provided "a deeply ironical measure of what is really heretical in smug Philistinism represented by both the conventional heretics and the conventional believers."¹⁰ His extremity revealed the sinfulness of the conventional. He became a "pin-point of light" to a smug skeptical society.

Certain themes have emerged which are important in her work: the theme of initiation, either from an innocence to corruption, or from fallenness to redemption; the radical insistence that man is justified only by grace through faith, and not by works or by any modern "saviors"; and Christ is often a terrible Savior, stern and demanding.

⁹Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁰Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Broken Center (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 223.

Grace makes use of sin. Grace works even through what is most corrupt in humanity.

One is reminded of Augustine's confession that "our hearts are restless until they can find peace in (God)," when Hazel Mote's struggles and yearnings are considered. Grace and judgment left their marks on him, and it was only at his death that he found a sense of tranquility. The author suggests that Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to rid himself of Jesus, this is the mystery of freedom.

A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

The ten stories in this volume are among the best of her work. They can be described as stories about original sin, in that each exposes an aspect of human sinfulness and folly. As always her Christ is present to judge, redeem, or purify. He presents the alternatives, and when one is chosen, the full consequences of that choice follow.

An epigraph to these stories is a quote from St. Cyril of Jerusalem: "The dragon is by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the father of the souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon." It is not clear who or what the dragon is supposed to represent. It could stand for an

incarnation of the demonic which, if man is not careful, will lead him to destruction. An encounter is unavoidable on life's pilgrimage, and it can make the difference between life and death. This is the significance of encounter and decision in O'Connor's fiction.

The title story shows one such encounter with the "dragon." It is a story about the Bailey family, a husband, wife, three children, and the husband's mother, who, while on their way to Florida meet a violent death at the hands of an escaped killer known as The Misfit. The encounter occurs between the grandmother and The Misfit. The grandmother is the epitome of Southern gentility, refinement, and respectability. But her stupidity led them off the main highway and caused them to have an accident on a deserted dirt road. There they meet The Misfit and his henchmen. The husband, wife, and three children are summarily shot, leaving the grandmother with The Misfit. He is the epitome of evil, a ruthless satanic figure, seeing no wrong in doing wrong. The grandmother asks him to pray to Jesus for help. The Misfit says he does not need any help, for he does all right by himself. About Jesus he tells her:

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and He shouldn't have done it. He's thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then its nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't,

then its' nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness . . ."¹¹

This is The Misfit's justification for his evil ways. Because he cannot know for sure whether Jesus raised the dead, he rejects faith and Jesus, and does his meanness.

The "moment of grace" occurs when the grandmother, almost in a stupor, reaches out and touches him on the shoulder, and says, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" At this The Misfit recoils and shoots her three times in the chest. He pronounces her verdict, saying, "She would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."¹² But, he tells his companions, there is no real pleasure in life. She recognizes The Misfit as one of her own because of her own lack of commitment to faith. She recognizes this condition only at the point of death, but then it was too late. If she could have "died daily," she would have been a good woman.

In most of her stories there is an alter ego present which precipitates the climax of the action.¹³ The

¹¹O'Connor, op. cit., p. 142. ¹²Ibid., p. 143.

¹³Robert Detweiler, "The Curse of Christ in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Comparative Literature Studies, III:2 (1966), 244.

alter ego of The Misfit is Christ, the same can be said of Hazel Motes.

In the story "The River" Miss O'Connor very sensitively weaves a story about a young boy, four or five years old, who gets baptized by an evangelical preacher in a backwoods river. The boy's parents display little concern for him, they are too busy with their drunken parties and nursing their hangovers. They give the boy over to a sitter, who takes him to see the healer at the river. The boy hears the healer preach, and then is given to the healer to be baptized. After the baptism the preacher tells the boy that now he counts, and that he did not before. The boy later leaves his home, and returns to the river. He wants to go to the Kingdom of Christ in the river. The swift moving current takes him away.

The story is a judgment against the boy's parents who, through their neglect, lose the boy. The boy did not "count" with them, but he discovered that he counts with someone else. That wilful self-centeredness and neglect will lead to loss seems to be the story's point.

In the world of O'Connor's fiction justice is ultimately triumphant, sooner or later all men encounter judgment. This is true of Mr. Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Mr. Shiftlet, as his name implies, is a shiftless and shifty, wandering tramp. He has half an

arm missing, and he walks with a limp. He inveigles himself in with an old widow and her deaf, idiot daughter who live on a farm. He marries the daughter in order to get the old lady's car. After dumping off his "bride" about a hundred miles from the farm, he heads for the city with his prize. He picks up a boy hitchhiker, and begins speaking to the boy about his "sweet mother," thinking the boy is leaving home. Mr. Shiftlet becomes maudlin about his mother, at which point the boy turns to him, and says, "You go to the devil! . . . My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!"¹⁴ and he jumps from the car. Mr. Shiftlet has been seen for the phony that he is, and has received the judgment that he deserved.

An explication of the need for grace to reconcile the alienated is seen in the story "The Artificial Nigger." The story reveals how pride, hubris can drive people apart and erect walls between them. Old Mr. Head is an upright, dignified, and totally moral gentleman. He has decided to take his grandson, Nelson, on a trip to the city, to show him that it was not such a great place. It was to serve as part of the boy's initiation into adulthood. Once in the city the grandfather gets them lost, but will not admit it to Nelson. Mr. Head hides from Nelson when the boy sat down to rest. When the boy awakes he discovers that his

¹⁴O'Connor, op. cit., p. 170.

grandfather is gone, and he runs off looking for him. In his haste the boy runs into a lady carrying a bag of groceries. She begins yelling at him and threatening him. At that point Mr. Head arrives at the scene. The lady asks him if he knows the boy. Mr. Head denies that he has ever seen the boy.

Pride, an unnoticed flaw in his unblemished moral character, created a huge gulf between him and the boy. Only if Nelson would forgive him, he thought. But Nelson had his pride too, and he could not forget his grandfather's treachery. The gulf persisted until the sight of an "artificial nigger," a statue on a fence reconciled them, it dissolved their differences like an "action of mercy." A righteousness greater than his own revealed his sinfulness.

He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise.¹⁵

The grandfather's self-sufficiency, his moral pride and self-righteousness could not save him when the crisis came.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 213-214.

Only the grace of God, manifested as forgiveness and mercy, could restore his sin-sick soul. The old man learned what life would be like without God's redeeming grace to sustain it.

The sin of pride is exposed again in the story "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." Sally Poker Sash, one of Miss O'Connor's self-sufficient schemers, prays nightly that her one hundred and fouryear old grandfather will live through her graduation. She wanted to show the old general off to everybody, to show "what all was behind her." The old man was going to be a feather in her cap, he was going to be a decoration at her graduation. She was sixty-two, and had been going to summer school for twenty years trying to complete her degree. Now that the time had come, she was going to show "them," those young upstarts and innovators, that she had great and glorious traditions behind her! The old man "did not have any use for history because he never expected to meet it again. To his mind, history was connected with processions and life with parades and he liked parades."¹⁶ The old man dies right when his granddaughter was about to receive her diploma.

Another story from this collection, "Good Country People," brings together several of Miss O'Connor's favorite villians: a genteel woman, Mrs. Hopewell, a good

¹⁶Ibid., p. 234.

Christian woman, but one who did not believe any of it was true; a self-sufficient and evil schemer, Manley Pointer, the phoney Bible salesman; and a wilful intellectual, Hulga (nee Jay Hopewell), holder of a Ph.D. in philosophy.

The Bible salesman comes to the Hopewell home to make a sale. Mrs. Hopewell extols him as one of those "good country people," whose virtues are unquestionable. Hulga, the rationalist and skeptic, believes she can seduce the apparently naive Bible salesman. But, as things turn out, it is she who is duped. He feigns love, and gets her to let him remove her wooden leg, which she has worn since she was ten and is very sensitive about. He runs off with her leg, as a souvenir of his conquest, and tells her that, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!"¹⁷

Hulga's physical affliction, as in O'Connor's other characters, is a sign of her spiritual deformity. The Bible salesman exposed her at her most vulnerable point, without the leg she was made entirely dependent. The author is trying to show that Hulga's salvation through reason and intellect is a sham, it is folly, and leads to the losing of the life that she believed she had found.

O'Connor often uses the "country" and the "city" as symbols for good and evil places and ways of life. This

¹⁷Ibid., p. 261.

story shows, however, that she is not anti-urban, that original sin is found wherever men are. Nor can it be said that she is anti-intellectual. She passes judgment upon learning only if it becomes one's god and source of salvation. The grace of God in Christ is upheld over any form of idolatry.

While Christ is present in some form in all of her fiction, the story "The Displaced Person" is strongly Christological. Christ is seen as the Displaced Person, the one who upsets the balance of peoples' lives, the Great Displacer of the righteous.

The very independent and strong willed Mrs. McIntyre is trying to run a farm on her own. She has a Negro and a white family working for her, but they get little work done. The local Catholic priest persuades her to give work to a family of Displaced Persons, refugees from war-torn Poland. The new man works very hard, and has many abilities and skills. Initially Mrs. McIntyre is exultant over his work, and calls the man "her salvation." Later she becomes threatened when the man begins to displace things. The Negroes and poor-whites are threatened. In a moment of collusion they witness silently the death of the Pole. After this Mrs. McIntyre loses nearly everything--her help and her health.

Thus, again O'Connor illustrates what happens in an

encounter with Christ. It is a life-and-death matter. The wrong decision or the failure to decide will inevitably lead to destruction. Only by the recognition of one's sinfulness and utter dependence upon the grace of God can one find salvation.

THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY

This, Miss O'Connor's second longer work of fiction, takes its theme from Matthew 11:12, Douai version: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." The novel concerns a struggle for a man's soul. Francis Marion Tarwater is beleaguered by two opposing forces: the haunting memory of his God-drunk great-uncle, who called him to baptize Rayber's idiot son; and Rayber, the modern psychologist, who has found "salvation" through the intellect.

Rayber represents the do-gooder reformer type. He attempts to save Tarwater from the influence of his dead uncle. And he is determined to prevent him from baptizing his son, Bishop. Tarwater is also trying to escape the prophetic legacy of his great-uncle. But in spite of himself he accomplishes his task in the act of drowning Bishop. Tarwater is Christ-haunted, he cannot ever escape the "bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus." This leads him

back to his great-uncle's grave, where he hears his charge: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY."¹⁸ He then heads for "the dark city where the children of God lay sleeping."

A story from the last collection of stories is similar thematically and structurally to this novel. This is the story entitled "The Lame Shall Enter First." Corresponding to Rayber is Sheppard, the City Recreational Director and psychologist-counselor. Sheppard "attempts to reform Rufus Johnson, a juvenile delinquent with a club foot, and ironically loses in the process first the affection and finally the very life of his own son, Norton."¹⁹

Sheppard is one of O'Connor's do-gooder reformers, who is dedicated and trained to help people. He is deeply concerned with the case of Rufus Johnson. He feels that Rufus' anti-social behavior stems from a complex over his clubfoot. Sheppard asks Rufus why he does the things he has done. Rufus explains that the Devil has him in his power. For a moment Sheppard felt a "dull despair as if he were faced with some elemental warping of nature that had happened too long ago to be corrected now."²⁰ But he cannot accept such "an explanation," and he is going to try

¹⁸Ibid., p. 447. ¹⁹Drake, op. cit., p. 35.

²⁰Flannery O'Connor, Everything that Rises Must Converge (New York: Signet Book, 1967), p. 136.

to explain Rufus' explanation, his devil. He wants this boy to see the universe, and to know that the darkest parts of it can be penetrated. To Sheppard everything can be explained.

Tirelessly Sheppard works to win Rufus' confidence, even at the expense of his own son. But Rufus is having considerable influence upon Sheppard's son, Norton. Rufus teaches the boy all about Jesus, the Bible, Heaven, and Hell. Norton learns that his dead mother is in Heaven, and that the only way to get there is to die. Sheppard's humanist explanations are weak in comparison.

Sheppard resolves that he is going to save Rufus, his good will triumph. Rufus tells him to save himself, for only Jesus can save him. Rufus also tells Sheppard that the devil has him in his power. To Rufus Sheppard is nothing but a "big tin Jesus (who) thinks he's God." Rufus lies and steals because he is good at it, his foot has nothing to do with it.²¹ Sheppard is defeated, and is shown in a truly tragic condition:

He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson. His image of himself shrivelled until everything was black before him.²²

²¹Ibid., pp. 162-163. ²²Ibid., p. 164.

He learns of the reality of the Devil and of his own sinfulness too late for them to have made a difference with his son. He finds that his son has committed suicide to join his mother in Heaven.

There is no salvation in good works or self. Again it is only in Christ that salvation is to be found. To live without Him is hell. The wages of sin is death, and the consequences of the characters' choices are inevitable. This is O'Connor's constant theme. For her the denial by modern man of the reality of the Devil or the demonic is one of the greatest sins.

EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE

The title of this last collection of her stories comes from Teilhard de Chardin, whose works Flannery O'Connor had been reading. For her the title is used with irony. No vision, no matter how vast, must skirt the Crucifixion. Her earthy sense of life is a corrective to views which would deny agony and suffering. Robert Fitzgerald notes that "'rising' and 'convergence' in these stories . . . are shown in classes, generations, and colors. What each story has to say is what it shows."²³

In the title story there is an encounter between Julian, the intellectual, and his mother, the genteel

²³Ibid., p. xxiv.

Southern woman. Drake suggests that the story is a dramatization of Emerson's "thy love afar is spite at home."²⁴ Julian, the modern young liberal, has turned his spite at home, the hatred for his mother and the tradition she represents, into love afar for The Negro, who does not seem to want it. Julian tries to shame his mother into seeing the proper way to relate to Negroes. He is constantly caustic and harsh with her. When she tries to give a little Negro boy a penny, the Negro mother clouts her with her purse. Julian now really rubs it in, telling her that he told her so. Shortly Julian's mother collapses on the pavement and dies. Julian's dependence upon her is exposed in panic, and he enters "the world of guilt and sorrow." In trying to impose his will upon his mother to destroy her, he destroys himself.

This same dynamic is portrayed in Thomas of "The Comforts of Home." Here a man's intellect conflicts with his mother's naive do-gooder activity. Thomas is so wrapped up in his own intellectual pursuits that he is unable to recognize the Devil in the guise of Star Drake, whom his mother brings home from jail. Thomas' condition is described well:

Thomas had inherited his father's reason
without his ruthlessness and his mother's love

²⁴Drake, op. cit., p. 32.

of good without her tendency to pursue it. His plan for all practical action was to wait and see what developed.²⁵

This describes very well the intellectual's malaise--the lack of ability and courage to act. Thus events sweep by him until he is caught in a situation with little choice. Thomas ends up by killing his mother, who leaped in front of the girl as he shot.

Judgment and final realization come to Mrs. May, another of O'Connor's strong-willed, self-sufficient women figures, of "Greenleaf." She was a hard-working woman, whose fortitude kept things together. She is disgusted by the shiftless Greenleafs who have been in her employ for fifteen years. And yet their sons seem to be showing more than her own, much to her dismay. In trying to get Mr. Greenleaf to remove his sons' bull from the property, she is gored by the bull. And then "she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable."²⁶ Her warped pride was the sin that led to her downfall.

The story entitled "Revelation" is a brilliant exposition of the gospel paradox that the first shall be last and the last first. Mrs. Turpin is a solid, respectable, and dignified woman. She has always been hard-working and

²⁵O'Connor, Everything . . ., p. 115.

²⁶Ibid., p. 65.

good. This is why she cannot understand why she is singled out for dirty looks from a pimply-faced Wellesley College student in her doctor's office. The more Mrs. Turpin talked the more she received dirty looks. Suddenly she is hit by a book and attacked by the college girl. The girl tells Mrs. Turpin: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."²⁷

This really bewilders Mrs. Turpin. Why had she been singled out for that message? This question torments her. A vision comes to her which settles the issue in her mind.

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast hoard of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.²⁸

²⁷Ibid., p. 179.

²⁸Ibid., p. 186.

Mrs. Turpin is reminded that she and her lot are not in charge here, that she too possesses the sin of pride, and stands continuously in need of God's grace.

SUMMARY

Flannery O'Connor's fiction resonates with presence. It is apocalyptic and eschatological literature. Her drama has a cosmic dimension as well as being concrete and parabolic. It has a purgative effect on the reader, similar to the ancient Greek dramas. It shocks, it draws graphic grotesque images, it portrays violence and death. Miss O'Connor would agree with Yeats, who wrote: "Belief comes from shock which is not desired. Belief is renewed continually in the ordeal of death."²⁹

In nearly all of her stories there is a moment of grace, a crisis point which calls for some kind of a decision. A moment of truth comes to her characters which exposes them for what they are. Her stress upon "the moment" is Kierkegaardian, and is indicative of a kind of "crisis theology."

The author draws upon Christian theology to delineate the human predicament. Man is always and utterly dependent upon God's grace, and yet he is perversely deter-

²⁹Cited in M. Channing-Pearce, The Terrible Crystal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. vii.

mined to be on his own. She portrays the folly and danger of trying to live on any terms but God's. There are patterns of redemption or of judgment in all her fiction. Her Christ brings out a sword not peace, he unsettles and displaces, he puts the top on the bottom and the bottom on the top. It is God's grace in and through Christ that remains sovereign in all of her stories. Nothing else can hold sway. The power of the Devil is real, and takes many forms. And yet grace is ultimately triumphant over that power. The issues facing her characters in rural Georgia are matters of life and death, and are thus of concern to us all.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN UPDIKE--THE MOTIONS OF GRACE

John Updike was born in 1932, in Shillington, Pennsylvania, a place which figures prominently in many of his stories and novels. He graduated from Harvard in 1954, and then spent a year on a fellowship at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, in Oxford, England. From 1955 to 1957 he was a staff member of The New Yorker, to which he has contributed stories, essays, and poems. Since then he has devoted himself full-time to writing. He has to his credit over a dozen published books, including five novels, four collections of short stories, two poems, a collection of prose, and three children's books. His third novel, The Centaur, was awarded the 1964 National Book Award. He is regarded as one of the most talented and significant writers to emerge in this generation.

While the geography and social class involved are different, Updike's vision is not unlike that of Flannery O'Connor. There is the same concern for the modern, secular America which has lost its traditional values and faith, and seems to be floundering on the rocks of boredom, despair, and nihilism. There is the concern for the loss of true human sensibilities, and, using Scott's words again, the "inability to descry in the world any reality

that evokes a sense of ultimacy or of radical significance." Modern man regards the world blandly, with a kind of diffidence and lack of concern. He has lost touch with, or abandoned, his past, and has become numb to, or has relinquished, connection with life's vital and creative sources. It is this dessicating condition which Updike describes, attacks, and seeks to supplant with a new awareness of man's essential place within the created order and of his ultimate dependence upon God. Updike's style is markedly different from O'Connor's. She launched a violent blitzkrieg against the pretensions of modern man, seeking to call him, like Jesus calling Lazarus, from his tomb of death. Updike is urbane and indirect, holding a mirror in front of the world for it to see for itself its dull, distorted, shallow, and superficial image. Both authors are aware of the radicality of human sinfulness, and each, in his own way, seeks to portray it and its consequences to the individual and society. Updike's writings also portray the failure of Protestantism in the culture to keep pace with the changes in society and to maintain the vital connections with its roots in the faith.

John Updike, no less than was Flannery O'Connor, is a writer with basic Christian convictions. He attends church, and is theologically literate. The theologians most important to him are Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth.

He once acknowledged that Barth's theology was extremely vital at one critical point in his life. He quotes Barth as having said that "a drowning man cannot pull himself out by his own hair." To Updike this means that "there is no help within--without the supernatural the natural is a pit of horror. I believe that all problems are basically insoluble and that faith is a leap out of total despair."¹ Here is a clear affirmation of the need of man for God's grace. When this dependence is denied, rejected, or forgotten the consequences are ultimately destructive for human life. This conviction is illustrated in his work.

Further evidence of Updike's stance is seen in a forward written to a selection of his Olinger stories. He writes that the point of these stories is that "we are rewarded unexpectedly. The muddled and inconsequent surface of things now and then parts to yield us a gift."² In many of his stories he very sensitively, almost lyrically, demonstrates the awareness of a gracious, though mysterious, presence or quality that gives him "the impression of being surrounded by an incoherent generosity . . ."³ In discussing his boyhood, he notes that in growing up the encounter

¹Jane Howard, "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?" Life, LXI: 19 (November 4, 1966), 74.

²John Updike, Olinger Stories: A Selection (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. vii.

³Ibid.

with the "three great secret things"--sex, religion, and art--is determinative of much of one's later life. A good deal of his fiction tries to show how this is so. In reflecting further upon his boyhood, he writes:

And in fact there is a color, a quiet but tireless goodness that things at rest, like a brick wall or a small stone, seem to affirm. A wordless reassurance these things are pressing to give. An hallucination? To transcribe middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and mystery: is it possible or, in view of the suffering that violently colors the periphery and that at all moments threatens to move into the center, worth doing? Possibly not; but the horse-chestnut trees, the telephone poles, the porches, the green hedges recede to a calm point that in my subjective geography is still the center of the world.⁴

The ability "to transcribe middleness" is one of the distinctive features of Updike's work. He has a clear perception into the ordinary, and the ability to show that there is a dignity and grandeur even there. His general subject is the American Protestant smalltown middle class. He likes middles, for there extremes clash and ambiguity restlessly rules. He believes that what happens there is important and worth examining.⁵ In depicting the struggles within the middle class against the loss of values, the boredom, fragmenting pressures and strains, the un-faith,

⁴John Updike, Assorted Prose (New York: Fawcett Crest Book, 1965), p. 146.

⁵Howard, op. cit., p. 80.

and loss of community, he shows the significance of small victories which can be won over doubt and confusion, and he affirms the hope of new beginnings.

THE POORHOUSE FAIR

This is Updike's first novel, and it concerns the life of the old people in a New Jersey poorhouse about the year 1974. The action takes place on the day of the annual fair, to which the people in the neighboring community are invited to come and purchase the handicrafts of the boarders. The home is administered by the very efficient and professional humanitarian Mr. Conner. Since coming to the home he has made many needed repairs and improvements, and strives to maintain the plant neatly and sanitarily. He tries to be impartial, and to do all he can to help the old folks maintain their dignity to the end. In spite of these qualities and achievements he does not have the respect of the residents. They remember fondly the previous prefect Mendelssohn, who, even though he was a day-time drinker and neglected the buildings, made them feel human. Conner resents the peoples' continual affection for Mendelssohn. At one point, several of the people, spontaneously, and following the lead of Gregg, pelt Conner with the rocks he had asked them to pick up. Conner is stunned by this gesture. He thinks that Hook is responsible for this "mass defiance."

The main protagonist of the novel, representing an opposing type to Conner, is the oldest resident and ex-school teacher Hook. He commands the respect of the people, and many turn to him for counsel. Updike calls him the "man of thought." He represents the old, traditional, American values; he affirms belief in God as the source of all goodness, and looks to the life eternal. In a debate with Conner, who believes that creation is a result of an accident, that the universe is mostly emptiness, and that "heaven" is the perfect society, a utopia free of hunger, disease, pain, oppression, and waste, Hook says:

" . . . There is no goodness, without belief. There is nothing but busy-ness. And if you have not believed, at the end of your life you shall know you have buried your talent in the ground of this world and have nothing saved, to take into the next."⁶

Where Conner sees "accident" and "emptiness," Hook sees an intricately patterned and ordered universe which manifests the Creator's craftsmanship. What Conner would call "poor conditioning," Hook calls sin. Conner speaks about Man and Humanity in the abstract--he, like Charlie Brown, loves Mankind, but cannot stand people!--and Hook speaks of concrete historical men.

Besides old Hook to challenge Conner, there are Lucas and Gregg. Updike calls Lucas "the man of flesh."

⁶John Updike, The Poorhouse Fair (New York: Crest Book, 1958), p. 81.

Lucas has the nagging habit of scratching the inside of his ear with a wooden match. He has the chore of feeding the pigs. He is the one who often goes to Conner with the peoples' complaints. In one interesting and symbolic scene, he is seen chasing his escaped parakeet through the halls. He finally captures the bird when it flew in a room and landed at the feet of a dying man. The life of the flesh is as fleeting as a bird's flight.

Gregg is "the man of passion." He reqects ardently and passionately to Conner's official meddlings. He expresses the strongest contempt for Conner after he had put name plates on the inmates' chairs. He is an ill-tempered, foul-mouthed old salt who rages against injustices and indignities. Yet all his life he has never been able to act out on his feelings physically. But he manages to get to Conner on two occasions. He started the stoning, which wounded the prefect's pride. And it was he who sent Conner the letter of criticism, which he signed "A Town's Person." This hurts Conner the most, because he prides himself on his good record, and is afraid that it will hurt his chances of advancement. To do these things is a breakthrough for Gregg, and he is left dancing a jig for joy at the novel's end.

By projecting into the not-too-distant future the novel is an implicit but strong criticism of the contemporary environment. It opts for the stance of rebellion

against those forces and conditions which threaten to de-humanize or stifle human life. It suggests that a society which forgets its connections with history, and which denies its traditional faith is heading in a perilous direction. The novel is concerned for the destiny of the American soul. It describes the people as they come to the old folks' fair:

Heart had gone out of these people; health was the principal thing about the faces of the Americans that came crowding through the broken wall to the poorhouse fair. They were just people, members of the race of white animals that had cast its herd over the land of six continents. Highly neutral, brachycephalic, uniquely able to oppose their thumbs to the four other digits, they bred within elegant settlements, and both burned and interred their dead. History had passed on beyond them. They remembered its moment and came to the fair to be freshened in the recollection of an older America. . . (Now) there was to be no war; we were allowed to decay of ourselves. And the population soared like diffident India's, and the economy swelled, and iron became increasingly dilute, and houses more niggardly built, and everywhere was sufferance, good sense, wealth, irreligion, and peace. The nation became one of pleasure-seekers; the people continued to live as cells of a body do in the coffin, for the conception "America" had died in their skulls.⁷

Hook is quick to add that it is not as if God does not want people to have a happy minute. But they must be seen as "minutes given as a present, while the hands are busy with serious matters."⁸ Hook seems to be saying that the dependence upon the grace of God and hard work once served as the foundation and motivating force of America.

⁷Ibid., pp. 109-110. ⁸Ibid., p. 110.

The novel is a prophetic indictment against a faithless and sterile humanism which prolongs life but stifles living. That the book intends to be a warning is seen in the epigraph. Updike quotes the words of Jesus in Luke 23:31, E. V. Rieu translation: "If they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when the wood is dry?" On the one hand the novel is saying that it is the so-called healthy America which has lost its lining "sap," and that its old people like Hook still retain their essential vitality. On the other hand the novel is a judgment against a world which can consign its old folks to a lifeless poorhouse. It is critical of the Conner's whose complete devotion to Man may lead to "final solutions," to a benevolent genocide, in the name of the good of man! Certainly, it is Conner and, his sycophant assistant, Buddy, who are candidates for fascism, an extreme form of humanism. The thoughtful Hook, and in his own way, Gregg, deny and protest that man is not the measure of all things! They attack and expose Conner's hubris, the consequences of which can only be tragic.

The novel ends on a rather ambiguous and disturbing note. Conner blamed Hook for his troubles that day, and had had an angry encounter with him. Later, after the fair and when all were in bed, Hook thought:

His encounter with Conner had commenced to trouble him. The young man had been grievously

stricken. The weakness on his face after his henchman had stolen the cigar was troubling to recall; an intimacy had been there Hook must reward with help. A small word would perhaps set things right. As a teacher, Hook's flaw had been over-conscientiousness; there was nowhere he would not meddle. He stood motionless, half in moonlight, groping after the fitful shadow of the advice he must impart to Conner, as a bond between them and a testament to endure his dying in the world. What was it?⁹

This is the concern the novelist wants America to share. He is calling for a critical reassessment of the goals and direction of America, lest she gain the world but lose her life. The novel also shares the same sentiment of Dylan Thomas' moving poem, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," where the poet calls out for us to "rage, rage against the dying of the light."

THE SAME DOOR AND PIGEON FEATHERS

These two collections of short stories originally appeared in The New Yorker. They reveal the author's great sensitivity of perception and description. He gives the reader, like someone focussing a projector lens, a clear vision of human realities that so often go unseen and thus unknown. Many of the stories are about different aspects of life in Olinger (his Shillington), and capture, with poignant detail, past feelings and their significance. Several of the stories are set within the City of New York,

⁹Ibid., p. 127.

and reflect a sense of dislocation, fragmentation, and disarray.

As Kenneth Hamilton suggests, in his study of Updike, most of the New York stories are about disappointment.¹⁰ This is largely due to the losing of a sense of place when moving to the city. It causes a fundamental disorganization of life's basic patterns and rhythms. One illustration of this is the story "Incest." Here a young couple's struggle to maintain a sense of continuity is strained. Ironically, they are reading Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, which the husband Lee calls "Sodom and Gomorrah." He has been having dreams which seem to identify his mother-in-law, his wife Joan, and his baby daughter, also named Joan. The story conveys a sense of "unnaturalness," and a turning inward via an imaginary "incest."

The story "Toward Evening" is another illustration of how urban life has created a condition of detachment from the created order; it portrays "the opposition between the spontaneous vision maintained in a complete life and the broken existence of the city dweller."¹¹ A sense of the blankness of the present is shown graphically when Rafe,

¹⁰Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, John Updike: A Critical Essay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 23.

¹¹Ibid., p. 24.

on his way home from work on the bus, watches the numbers of the houses go by, connecting each with an historical date:

The clearly marked numbers on the east side of the street ran: 1832, 1836, 1846, 1850 (Wordsworth dies), 1880 (great Nihilist trial in St. Petersburg), 1900 (Rafe's father born in Trenton), 1902 (Broque leaves Le Havre to study painting in Paris), 1914 (Joyce begins Ulysses; war begins in Europe), 1926 (Rafe's parents marry in Ithaca), 1936 (Rafe is four years old). Where the present should have stood, a block was torn down, and the numbering began again with 2000, a boring progressive edifice.¹²

History seems to be abandoned leaving a void in the present and a dim prospect of hope for the future. The artificiality of urban life is seen by allusions to the use of celluloid to create optical illusions, and the enamelled look of a person's face. This is further seen in the disappointment of Rafe's wife Alice when Rafe brought home a celluloid mobile for the baby, instead of one made of beautiful polished woods. In spite of the unnatural and "uncreated" nature of the environment--complete with huge blinking, neon signs, which blank out the stars--Rafe's dinner is near-sacrament, and there is the suggestion of the transcendent amidst the family.

There are these thematic elements which can be lifted up from these stories, and which are prominent in

¹²John Updike, The Same Door (New York: Crest Books, 1959), p. 53-54.

much of Updike's later work. First, there is the stress upon the family as the natural human unit. An individual's experience here is foundational and determinative of his existence. Second, the family comes from sexuality. This is an important element in Updike's work. Third, there is a strong sense of a universe composed of intricate patterns, delicate designs, and rich textures. This universe undergirds and sustains life even though man often loses sight of it or seeks to break its fabric.¹³

Three of the Olinger stories reveal a certain graciousness about life, what Updike calls being rewarded unexpectedly, or having the impression of presence and a goodness. In "Friends from Philadelphia" a youth from a family of limited means is sent out with two dollars to buy a bottle of wine for the quests they are expecting from Philadelphia. The boy asks a friend's father to buy it for him. He is given back change, plus, unknown to him, a bottle of very expensive wine. The story "The Alligators" shows a bunch of fifth grade children picking on the new girl in the class. We learn that what seemed to be cruelty was really love, for the new girl was really loved from the beginning. The young adult of "The Happiest I've Been" experiences a high moment as he drives his friend's car into

¹³Hamilton, op. cit., p. 26.

the rising sun. He felt a pride in his own state and in knowing that someone trusted him enough to fall asleep beside him.

Two of the stories of The Same Door presage the novel Rabbit, Run. "Ace in the Hole" is about an ex-basketball star from Olinger High who seems at a loss what to do with his life. He is fast realizing that his past greatness cannot carry him through. This character is fully developed in the novel. In "Intercession" we meet a golfer who is very similar to Jack Eccles in Rabbit, Run.

In Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories Updike penetrates deeper into themes he had only announced in his earlier volume. The great interrelated mysteries of sex, religion, and art are apparent throughout the stories, as well as the concern for the ability to descry the eternal in the temporal, the supernatural in the natural.

The sadness of the dissolving family is poignantly shown in the story "Dear Alexandros." This is done cleverly through the use of two letters. The first letter comes from the Greek boy Alexandros to his "American Parents." He expresses concern because he had not heard from them lately. The next letter is sent by his American "father," Mr. Bentley, who explains that he and Mrs. Bentley no longer live together, and he sadly relates elements that broke up his home. The divorce is the climax to the

severing of a relationship to a joyful pattern of existence. Mr. Bentley tells the boy, that in contrast to his country, America produces depressing and sad tales.

The problem of faith is explored in the story "The Astronomer." Walter feared the visit of his friend Bela, the astronomer. The reason he feared the scientist was because of his atheism. Walter had recently discovered Kierkegaard, and a subjective faith. He feared that his inner-structure would be crumbled by the objective lucidity of the astronomer. Bela is reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's enlightened disbelievers or godless intellectuals, and the same is true of Conner in The Poorhouse Fair. Walter listened to Bela describe the black hills of New Mexico, in tones similar to Pascal's description of the infinite spaces of the universe, and he saw that the astronomer had known fear. To Walter, this was a revelation of light that shines out of the darkness of the past.

"The Lifeguard" is an amusing, yet very symbolic story about a theological student who works as a lifeguard during the summer. He sees his job in priestly terms, and he watches carefully the sea of near-naked human bodies. The parable here is reminiscent of the one Updike remembers from Barth: a drowning man cannot pull his own self out. The lifeguard rues the fact that he has yet to hear anyone call for help. Perhaps it is because few dare to take the

risk of getting in water over their heads, a fear which obviates the very purpose and existence of "the lifeguard."

The title story presents a crisis of faith. David Kern is a growing adolescent very concerned about the nature of heaven. He had been shocked by H. G. Well's account of Jesus. His faith was critically threatened, intimations of death filled him with dread. He turned to his minister at the confirmation class and asked about the "Resurrection of the Body." David needed a reassuring word or gesture to bring him from the brink of fear. He felt betrayed by the minister who answered that Heaven was the way the goodness of a person lives on after he dies. He was indignant at this fatuous answer, for he wanted Heaven to be something. His parents were no help either. His mother believed that Man made God, and his father jokingly welcomed death as a release. So, David stood alone against death. His grandmother asked him to shoot the pigeons in the barn, for they were causing a mess. After shooting them, David studied the feathers of the pigeons, and he felt certain: "that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole creation by refusing to let David live forever."¹⁴ David's crisis has been solved, at least for a while. The

¹⁴John Updike, Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories (New York: Crest Book, 1962), p. 105.

The awareness of the pattern and design of the created universe, an important Updike theme, gave David a new lease on life.

Another David Kern story deals with another crisis of faith. Now David is married with four children, in the story "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car." This time David loses his faith after he lusts for a woman he met at a party. This led him to feel that he had committed adultery in his heart. The universe which permitted him to commit adultery is a universe that would easily permit him to die, and finally, the God who permitted that fear was unworthy of existence. He also learns that his father was in the hospital, and had lost his faith. But again it is the awareness of the significance of patterns and rituals that enables him to transcend the crisis. He says "we in America need ceremonies . . ." ¹⁵

This idea of the need for ceremonies is thoughtfully developed by Michael Novak in an article entitled "Updike's Quest for Liturgy." He suggests that ceremonies are necessary for two reasons: through them we become human, and they enable us to conceive what immortality is like, and therefore what we are like. ¹⁶ The first part of

¹⁵Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁶Michael Novak, "Updike's Quest for Liturgy," Commonweal LXXVIII (May 10, 1963), 192.

the four-part story deals with an image of human activity seen in children's feet packing dirt into a path. This is a time of innocence. "To become as a little child is to treat the earth as a playmate, unselfconsciously commune with things, be aware of a fatherly presence, know that the piercing sweet call of death bids one home."¹⁷ But, Updike complains, the machines come and ruin this communion, America attacks nature. America has always had a "Manifest Destiny" complex--to conquer a continent. Updike says that the only thing we have learned was this paradox: the more we master matter outwardly, the more it overwhelms us in our hearts.¹⁸

"Churchgoing" is seen as a human recreation, it gives people the opportunity to be themselves, to observe and to think. But the churches do not seem to understand symbol and ceremony any longer. They are technological and dry, they fail to relate men to the earth. A dying cat poses the question of life and death, but Kern will not let the cat die without ceremony. The car is a symbol of life in America, losing nature, we gain the car. "Updike is after the incomprehension, the shallowness, the easy

¹⁷Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁸Updike, Pigeon Feathers . . ., p. 169.

adjustment, the lack of life in our scientized environment . . ."¹⁹ Updike is creating symbols to grasp immortality, and religion.

In these stories we can see the secular pressures exerted against religious faith. Bela of "The Astronomer" represents modern intellectualism and its attack on faith. The minister in "Pigeon Feathers" represents a kind of humanism which dilutes Christian faith. And in the story "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car" an excrescence of moralism inhibits an authentic faith.

OF RABBITS AND CENTAURS

Rabbit, Run is Updike's second novel, and is an expansion of the short story "Ace in the Hole." The main character is Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. His last name may be symbolical, and mean "stream of fear" from the German angst strom. Rabbit is a runner. He runs away from any situation which threatens to engulf him, to corner him, or get him in a hole. He used to be a high school basketball star, he was a somebody, people looked up to him. Now Harry sells a vegetable peeler in a five-and-dime store, and comes home each night to a pregnant wife who slops around the house all day watching television and drinking

¹⁹Novak, op. cit., pp. 194-195.

Old Fashions. She gives their little boy to one of the grandparents to baby-sit each day. Rabbit cannot take this kind of life any longer, and he runs away. He realizes that he does not have a place to go, so he runs to his old high school coach Tothero. Through him Rabbit meets the semi-whore Ruth, with whom Rabbit takes up because she "feels right" to him. While trying to get his clothes out of his apartment, Rabbit meets The Reverend Jack Eccles, his in-laws' clergyman. Eccles heckles Rabbit throughout the whole novel, and desperately desires to save the Rabbit. Harry does not run home until his wife Janice has their baby. He returns home with new resolve, he is full of love. When she spurns his sexual advances Rabbit, enraged, runs back to Ruth. Janice becomes depressed and starts drinking heavily. In a drunken stupor she accidentally drowns the baby in the bathtub. Eccles tracks down Rabbit again with the bad news. Rabbit runs home again. Things seem to be reconciled, when Rabbit publicly, at the funeral for the baby, declares that Janice did it, but that it is all right! Everyone is shocked, and Rabbit runs away. When he returns to Ruth, she tells him that she is pregnant, and gives him a choice: either marry her or she will abort the baby. Rabbit runs, runs . . .

Rabbit is a kind of modern rendition of Hamlet, for whom the time is out of joint: O cursed spite, that ever

he was born to set it right! He is a kind of helpless Don Quixote caught in a net not entirely his own making. Rabbit is responsible, yet also not responsible, for what befell him. All occasions seem to inform against him, and he can only react impulsively, instinctively. He is a latter-day hero in quest of the Holy Grail, and no one quite comprehends his quest. He seeks a recovery of a time of innocence and goodness, when he could win by playing fair, when justice seemed real. Those all around him--Janice, Eccles, Tothero, the parents, and even Ruth--seem to stand in the way of his search, they are an affront to his ideal. Thus, his running is his way of rebelling against those forces within his environment which deny his claims.

Rabbit hears the advice from the head Mouseketeer to "know thyself," which, the Mouseketeer says, means to be what you are. This is not the way Rabbit expresses the problem of identity. For Rabbit the question of mystery is the Pascalian one: why is he himself here, in this place, in this time? The arbitrariness of it frightens him. This is a much more ultimate question than the "who am I?" of the Mouseketeer. The question is part of Rabbit's intense and uncompromising search for ultimate values and meanings. Rabbit has the sense that "there's something that wants me

to find it."²⁰ Certainly, in *Rabbit*, this quest for ultimate meanings becomes perverted into solipsism, but he has raised the important issues which stand in stark relief to a society bereft of its values and sense of direction.

There does not seem to be anyone in his world who can answer his anxious queries. From his old coach Tothero, Rabbit hears: "Right and wrong aren't dropped from the sky. We. We make them. Against misery. Invariably, Harry, invariably" ²¹ This message depresses Rabbit, for he wants to believe in a supernatural source of all things. From his disputations with the self-annointed "hound of heaven" Eccles, Rabbit also gets inadequate answers. The clergyman tells Rabbit, in words that are diametrically opposed to the Christian concept of salvation by grace, that : ". . . We must work for forgiveness; we must earn the right to see that thing behind everything" ²²

This position is seriously challenged and refuted by Rabbit's old Lutheran minister Kruppenbach, whom Rabbit does not encounter at all in the novel. Kruppenbach tells Eccles that he has been prostituting himself and his

²⁰John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (New York: Crest Book, 1960), p. 107.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 232.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 234.

message by meddling in Rabbit's struggles. The minister should not act as a cop in the lives of people, Kruppenbach asserts. The old German tells Eccles that he does not know what his role is, that the minister should be an exemplar of faith, for there is where comfort comes from! The minister should be full and hot with Christ, he should burn the people with the force of belief, and not run to and fro with busyness.²³ It is this message that Rabbit never hears in his frenetic scurrying about for answers, but he desperately needs to hear it. The world seems to have closed him out of it--the hardness of heart, and external circumstances blocking the motions of grace, which Updike quotes from Pascal in the epigraph to the novel.

The novel has received several and sometimes conflicting, critical reports. One critic sees the novel as a brief against the "return to nature" philosophy.²⁴ He cites the destructive character of Rabbit's impulse to the natural. This comes from a permissive society lacking in prescriptive values, which brings about regression to animalistic responses. The novel presents a thematic conflict between tradition and nature, past and present.

²³Ibid., p. 143.

²⁴Gerry Brenner, "Rabbit, Run: John Updike's Criticism of the 'Return to Nature,'" Twentieth Century Literature, XII (April 1966), 3-14.

Another critic has analyzed the novel in terms of Reinhold Niebuhr's concept of man.²⁵ He argues that this novel is Updike's indictment of Culture-Protestantism. He argues that Updike treats in fictional form what Niebuhr analyzed theologically. This concerns Niebuhr's analysis of social and individual morality. On the social level there is the problem of the demonic nature of social "Collectives." On the individual level the problem concerns the two basic kinds of sin which stem from man's nature as a unity of finiteness and freedom. From the neglect of freedom man falls into sensuousness and irresponsibility. From neglect of finiteness man falls into pride and the assertion of human independence. Both of these dimensions of the moral life are examined in Rabbit, Run. The novel is thus a criticism and judgment of contemporary communal structures and institutions which have failed to form coherent patterns of meaning and value for human life. This study is interesting, but seems rather stilted in its tying the novel so closely to Niebuhr's theology. It tends to put too much of the blame upon Rabbit, and it misses seeing the full artistic function of the author's main character.

²⁵Robert Detweiler, Four Spiritual Crises in Mid-Century American Fiction (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1963), pp. 14-24.

David Galloway's study of the absurd hero, already alluded to above, sees Rabbit as a saint-like absurd hero. He is seen as a rebel against an absurd environment, whose complete devotion to a single ideal alienates him from his world. He becomes an absurd hero because the reality that he encounters is disproportionate to his inner-convictions. He is saint-like because of his singular devotion to a spiritual ideal. He is a saint outside of the Christian tradition precisely because it is one of the institutions which has failed in the modern environment. Galloway argues:

When faced with the loneliness and lack of values of the modern world, man can do one of three things. He can seek escape through sensualism; he can attempt to find reconciliation with his fellows through some form of humanism; or he can break from all conventional ethics and systems and actively pursue new ones.²⁶

The absurd hero takes the third option, and, because the quest is for values and meaning, it is a religious quest. Thus, Rabbit is paradoxically seen as an individual pressing for grace, even though he is judged by his environment.

It can be said that grace is the overall problem of the novel. On the one hand there is the judgment against present structures of society, including the religions, especially the Protestant community, for failing to be proper

²⁶David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 37.

channels of grace. Rabbit's rebellion symbolizes this. On the other hand, the novel is critical of the destructive irresponsibility of Rabbit's behavior, his own hardness of heart. In many ways the novel is a sad and tragic story, whose hero, while eliciting sympathy, does not possess the grandeur and ability to lift the spirit of a truly great tragic hero. The contemporary novel is a witness to the fact that there are few heroes among us.

The Centaur is a story about George Caldwell, a popular science teacher at Olinger High School. It is a plain and simple story told through narrative, and first-person reminiscence of George's son Peter. What lifts the story above the plane of everyday life is the mythological framework woven throughout the novel. George Caldwell is not just a high school teacher, he is also the immortal Chiron, the centaur, teacher of the gods. Each of the characters has a mythological counterpart: the principal Zimmerman represents Zeus, Peter Caldwell is Prometheus. The ancient Chiron gave up his immortality in order to release Prometheus, the fire-stealing man, from eternal torment. The purpose of the mythology is to show the significance of George Caldwell's life, in particular, and the mythological dimensions of human life in general. Galloway suggests that the use of myth and legend in modern literature serves two purposes: to suggest universal, archetypal

experiences, and to demonstrate, by comparison, the diminished stature and relevance of modern man.²⁷

Updike sets the theme of the novel in the quote from Karl Barth in the epigraph: "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth." The novel examines the meaning of this statement. The centaur is not only a good image to describe the life of George Caldwell, it is also a good image for Barth's quote: the half man and half beast, the creature inextricably bound to two realms.

Caldwell is a dedicated teacher, he truly wants to lead his students out of ignorance. He is self-effacing and doubts whether he is getting through. He has a real vitality about him, a buoyancy, which sustains him and communicates itself to others. He loves unselfishly and quite unselectively. It is this quality especially which makes him a good teacher and man. Caldwell wants to protect his son from suffering, and he gives his life sacrificially. Peter/Prometheus is the direct beneficiary of Caldwell/Chiron's sacrifice, but Caldwell's love distinguishes him from the centaur, for it is extended to all. Thus, Caldwell's prototype is Christ and not Chiron. Of all Updike's characters George Caldwell comes the closest

²⁷Ibid., p. 41.

to being a traditional Christ figure. In the face of a cruel meaningless world George Caldwell has the courage and ability to keep struggling and to keep loving. Only a mythological figure could do justice to that kind of fortitude. He is indeed a contrast to Rabbit. His struggle in love makes him a saint-like figure as well. The intensity of his love enable him to transcend the physical boundaries.

Caldwell got the scare of his life the time his minister-father was dying. The dying man asked, "Do you think I'll be eternally forgotten?"²⁸ At the last of life he doubted the immortality that he preached all his life. This made George doubt his own faith. But he discovers a redeeming truth about his life: "he discovered that in giving his life to others he entered a total freedom . . . (and that) only goodness lives. But it does live."²⁹ George had discovered the basic, paradoxical truth of the universe: he who loses his life will find it. This is the truth of grace.

Chiron sacrificed immortality to release Prometheus from bondage. Caldwell sacrificed his life in love, and gained immortality.

²⁸John Updike, The Centaur (New York: Crest Book, 1963), p. 73.

²⁹Ibid., p. 220.

OF THE FARM AND THE MUSIC SCHOOL

In the short novel Of the Farm the author deals with the themes of dislocation and abandonment which stem from the forsaking of certain basic values. It also reflects the tension between two worlds, and the gods of each--the world of the farm and that of the city. A man's divorce from his wife also, in some way, divorces him from his former intimate connection with nature. The overall issue is that of freedom as the epigraph from Sartre indicates.

Joey Robinson had recently remarried to Peggy, who was also divorced and had an eleven year old boy. They were going to spend a week-end with Joey's Mother, Mary, at the farm. He was going to mow weeds, and let Peggy and his mother get acquainted. They are of different worlds, and they clash. Joey is haunted by all the memories the house and farm bring back to him. His mother's conversations make him feel guilty and defensive about what he has done. With Joan, his first wife, he had three children. He had been a poet with Joan, now he was an "ad man" with Peggy. He had chosen to marry his mistress and abandon his wife and children. He later realizes that Peggy, though very sensuous, is stupid. Joey thought his beautiful new wife "made herself." His mother tells him: "See, you

forgot God."³⁰

The novel shows how Joey has regressed from his real freedom in a creative relationship with nature to a worldly bondage. His first wife was an appeal to his kindness as a man. The acknowledgement of that appeal tied him ethically to the earth. The farm is a symbol of that tie. But his choices led him from that connection. Now he is rootless, and feels dislocated from his true self. He abandons the farm. His mother is dying and can no longer keep up the farm. She knows that Joey will sell her farm, but she admonishes him to get a good price. In selling the farm Joey is selling out his heritage, and the faith that went with it.

The choices we make seem to lead us to the abandoning of our ties with the earth, and the forgetting of our God. We have yet to fill the void. The author asks: "Is this the way America is going, with no turning back?"

Wordsworth's poem "The World Is Too Much with Us" is suggestive of what this novel is trying to say:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our heart away, a sordid boon! . . .

³⁰John Updike, Of the Farm (New York: Knopf, 1965), p. 141.

For this, for everything, we are out of time;
 It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
 A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn³¹

The collection of stories entitled The Music School is an examination of several of Updike's familiar themes: role of sexuality, the results of separation and divorce, small occurrences with large meanings. The little story contrasts the disharmony of Alfred Schweigen's marital life with the harmony strived for by the children, his included, who attend the music school. Both he and his wife go to psychiatrists because of his infidelity. He and his friends "are all pilgrims, faltering toward divorce."³² He is learning that the sacramental host, the world, must be chewed, and that, at the feet of his young daughter, who possesses the harmony of the sacramental life, he dies, or thinks he does. This seems to be his only real hope for regaining his lost harmony.

LIFE IN THE APPLE ORCHARD

In The Poorhouse Fair Hook said that Americans are a bunch of pleasure seekers. This theme is explored in Updike's newest novel Couples. It is a long, detailed story

³¹Oscar Williams (ed.), The Mentor Book of Major British Poets (New York: Mentor Books, 1963), p. 68.

³²John Updike, The Music School (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 190.

of ten couples living adulterous lives with one another in the fictive town of Tarbox, Massachusetts. The couples are all around thirty-five, and have children. They have gotten bored, been tempted, and succumbed. They have fallen from grace, and live east of Eden romping in the sexual apple orchard. Their lives have become so dislocated from society that the assassination of President Kennedy barely causes a ripple in their little pool. This is the "post-pill paradise." The sexual giant of the crew, Piet Hanema, believes that God no longer loves America.

Sex seems to be an escape from empty reality. It represents longing for human relationship. But it does not seem to provide fulfillment of these longings. The result of these escapades was that "duty and work yielded ideals to truth and fun. Virtue was no longer sought in temple or market place but in the home--one's own home, and then the homes of one's friends."³³ They are living like the people of Israel at the foot of Sinai, who got tired of waiting for Moses to bring down the Law. In the meantime they frolic and build golden calves. In fact, the Congregational Church is topped with a golden rooster, and only it survives when the church burns down from lightning striking it.

³³John Updike, Couples (New York: Knopf, 1968), p. 106.

This love-tryst is absurdly shattered. A new couple comes to town, Ken and Foxy Whitman. She is pregnant. She and Piet fall in love, and after she has her baby by Ken, she gets pregnant by Piet. They turn to Freddy Thorne for help in finding an abortionist. He does this for the favor of sleeping with Piet's wife, Angela, who accepts the deal. The baby is aborted, and Piet and Foxy divorce their respective spouses, and get married. The group of couples is replaced by a younger crowd.

Removed from history's onward flow, yet fearing it as leading to death, Piet and the couples use sex as a way of capturing the past or stilling the moment in time. But, like Iseult, it can never be possessed, it is elusively out of reach.

SUMMARY

In many of Mr. Updike's stories and novels, it appears that he would share Matthew Arnold's verdict about faith in his "Dover Beach":

The sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.³⁴

³⁴Williams, op. cit., p. 298.

For, certainly, much of his writing has dealt with the loss of faith or abandonment of faith. Thus, a good deal of his writing has been polemical and critical of the soul-life of America.

His writing is also a testament to the significance of apparently small happenings. There is a recognition and affirmation of goodness, that it lives. There is the perception that we are rewarded unexpectedly, and of a presence in life. He sees the goodness and significance of the vast, patterned universe, and of our place in this order. The possibility and reality of love as a force within life is emphasized and affirmed.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

SUMMARY

An examination of contemporary experience, as reflected in the American novel, reveals disturbing features. Traditional structures of modern civilization are in a state of disorganization and breakdown. The world has lost its essential connection to the center and things are falling apart. Dissonance and incoherence, dereliction and estrangement describe much of contemporary life. The coming of age of the world, the rapid secularization of western civilization have taken their toll upon the human spirit. The losses appear greater than the gains. Man has lost the sense of the transcendent realm, of a presence, of things of radical significance. Life has become banal, flat, and humdrum. A good deal of contemporary secular theology has failed at the point of reviving the human imagination, and lifting it beyond itself. It is to art that man must look for the promise of grace, the stimulation of value and meaning. Art has the task of recreating vision to perceive in the world the incognitos of God and the disguises of his grace.

Three modern novelists have been studied from the perspective of Christian theology. The fundamental purpose

was to see whether they portray or express the possibility of grace in human life.

CONCLUSIONS

The selected writers have, what Scott has called, "a sense of their age" and produce a criticism or an examination of the contemporary experience. They also can be said to have a strategy of reconciliation.¹ Their work is basically religious in that they are concerned with the value and worth of human life, and the ultimate sources of that value and worth.

Edward Lewis Wallant has illustrated the grace of suffering, the discovery of the transcendent dimension, of the value and dignity of the human which comes through and with suffering. In suffering man recovers the tragic sense for life, the beginning point of human moral responsibility. Each of his novels is a dramatic affirmation of human life, and, as such, are themselves acts of grace. He shows that history, while tragic, is not without redeeming force, value, and meaning. There is a "hidden Christ" operating through history, who makes himself known in a love which withholds not itself, even from death. Two of his novels show that only a sacrificial, Christ-like death could

¹Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Rehearsals of Discomposure (New York: King's Crown Press, 1952), p. 9.

redeem the human situation and open up to new life closed and lonely lives.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is the "terrible swift sword" that "tramples out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored" in the searing, violent stories and novels of Flannery O'Connor. Nearly every story deals with the cosmic, yet very local struggle of sin and grace. Grace comes like a thief in the night, in the twinkling of an eye, in a moment of insight and choice. The wages of sin is death, and there is no escaping this conclusion. But where sin increases, there grace abounds all the more. O'Connor recaptures the power and intensity of the world of the New Testament in her work, and, like the New Testament, it is primarily kerygmatic.

John Updike's work attests to the motions of grace in life's middles. He excels in description, and his stories and novels are full of it. But these long descriptions are themselves part of his substance. They are still-lives, sensitive photographs focused upon the essential detail, and revealing something unperceived yet very real. His descriptions are a way of saying, "Do not go by so fast, you will miss something!" And he is genuinely concerned that middle class American society is losing something, is falling away from something valuable. He chronicles the old order giving way to a new. But this new

world now taking shape seems to have left something essential and vital behind, that one thing needful for true human life.

Each of the authors, in his own way, attacks the lack of wonder and awe of the created order in modern man. Each is appalled by man's loss of vision. Each shows the many disorders of the contemporary world. Each is critical, to the point of being judgmental, of the various forms of scientific or intellectual atheism and humanism. Wallant's Angelo, many of O'Connor's characters, Updike's Bela the astronomer, among others, represent this type of modern man, whose philosophy denies the truly human even while it affirms Mankind. The authors set themselves against the several forms that moralism takes in contemporary life. They wish to purge, to burn away these distorted forms from modern life, replacing them with authentic images of human life.

An important and classic image of man is that of the clown. Features of this figure are seen in many of O'Connor's grotesque characters, and to a great extent in Wallant's Sammy of The Children at the Gate. The clown reveals the tension between self-confidence and self-criticism, and is representative of the man who laughs for

God's sake.² The clown accepts the incongruities of life and reflects them in his actions. He accepts his humanity, no more and no less. He desires to be related to others in love. One incident after another of his life makes faith inevitable for him. He is neither like the wit, a victor over the foibles of others, nor like the butt, a victim of circumstance and exploitation. He is the victim-victor, reconciling in his own nature the tensions, ambiguities, and incongruities of his existence, and accepting the role of victim. He is a figure of hope and vitality. The clown shows, by his own precarious and frail life, our own human frailty and elasticity. Thus, "his stance is uniquely suited to reassert the human."³ He is aware of the incongruous involvement of the finite and the infinite. The clown is thus an image of Christ. They are both victims and victors. This description of the clown helps clarify the activity of Wallant's Sammy. He was always telling Angelo and others "funny" stories. His behavior was often comical. However, he wanted to be taken seriously, for he knew that beneath an antic disposition is a heart bursting with grief. He knew the very thin line between sad and happy events. His sacrificial death was his last, best

²Nelvin Vos, For God's Sake Laugh! (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), pp. 37 f.

³Ibid., p. 44.

"joke," which gave to Angelo, at least, a true sense of humor.

The irresistible encounter with grace results either in restoration and life or in exclusion and death. Each of Wallant's major characters were restored to the human community from a condition of exile and isolation. Most of O'Connor's stories concentrate on the consequences of sinfulness, and thus show judgment, exclusion, and death. Several of her stories reveal the positive results of the encounter with grace. In "The Artificial Nigger" Mr. Head is reconciled to his grandson through the "action of mercy." The same is also true of Mrs. Turpin of "Revelation." Updike too describes experiences of restoration or exclusion after the encounter with grace. The stories about David Kern illustrate this. Most of his novels show the condition of estrangement and alienation, and the possibilities of restoration and reconciliation.

Each of these writers would accept, and in many ways their work illustrates, Charles Peguy's description of the activity of grace in human life:

Grace is insidious, it twists and is full of surprises When it doesn't come from the right it comes from the left. When it doesn't come straight it comes bent, and when it doesn't

come bent it comes broken. When it doesn't come
from above it comes from below; and when it doesn't
come from the center it comes from the circumfer-
ence. . . .⁴

⁴Quoted in Amos N. Wilder, Modern Poetry and the
Christian Tradition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,
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